The relationship of dialogue and mission is a very important issue in the theology and practice of missions. The issue is complex because one’s answer reflects his or her understanding of several beliefs. First, the answer reflects one’s position on the theological value of non-Christian religions and the relation of these religions to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. The main questions on this dimension of the relation of dialogue to mission are the following:

Can dialog be understood as an exercise by Christians who wish to affirm ethical and spiritual truths found in other religions while at the same time remaining faithful to their own sincere convictions about Christ? Can the conviction that there is “no other name” be combined with an attitude of mutual trust and respect toward other religionists?\(^1\)

Second, an answer reflects one’s understanding of mission and its goals. How should dialogue be understood? As a requirement for effective Christian witness, with the conversion of the non-Christian as goal? Or dialogue as a substitute for such a witness?\(^2\) The second dimension of the relationship of dialogue and mission is the issue addressed in this article.

The question to be answered in this article is, What are the various perspectives on the goals of dialogue with other religions?

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2. Ibid.
in relation to mission?

Related to answering the above question are the following purposes: (1) To identify the positions of the Roman Catholic Church, the ecumenical churches, and the Protestant evangelicals on the goal of dialogue, and (2) to relate these goals to their understanding of the mission of the church.

The author hopes that the clarification of the goals of Christians in dialogue and awareness of the theological positions that underlie those goals will give guidance to persons preparing for or involved in dialogue. However, the dialogue pertaining here is of Christians with non-Christians, therefore excluding dialogue that takes place between churches of the Christian tradition.

Furthermore, the positions to be explored will be based only on three specific sources. The Roman Catholic understanding will be derived from the statement of the Secretariat for Non-Christians in 1984. The ecumenical or conciliar position will be studied from a 1983 declaration of the World Council of Churches. The Evangelical Protestant position will be investigated from the declaration of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization-sponsored Consultation on World Evangelization which met in 1980. These sources were chosen because they were expressions of understanding that come from approximately the same period in the development of mission theory.

The description of each view progresses in the following way. The background or the context of the document is presented first. The second part looks into the mission of the church as defined in the declaration. The third part is the definition and goals of dialogue. The last part is the view of the document on the relation of dialogue with the mission of the church.


THE GOALS OF DIALOGUE AND ITS RELATION TO MISSION

A ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

The first document to be considered is "The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission."6 The document was the formulation of the Secretariat for Non-Christian published in 1984. The declaration was the result of the Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. The formulations reflect the 20-year "experiences of dialogue which are occurring everywhere in the church." The focus of the document is specific: "It has reflected on the church's attitudes towards other believers, and especially on the relationship which exists between dialogue and mission."7 The aim of the document is to offer "elements of a solution to the difficulties which arise from the duties of evangelization and dialogue which are found together in the mission of the church."8 The background and intention of the document stated, we can now go to the main questions of this research.

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The understanding of the mission of the church in this document reflects previous Roman Catholic Church declarations. The mission of the church is rooted in its nature as a "living sign" of God's love.9 Paragraph eleven is the section on the mission of the church, and draws mainly from the Vatican II document, Ad Gentes:

The mission of the church is carried out by means of that activity through which, in obedience to Christ's command and moved by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, the church makes itself fully present to all persons and peoples . . .10

6. This document will be hereafter abbreviated as DM.
7. DM, par. 5.
8. Ibid., par. 7.
9. Ibid., par. 9.
10. Ibid., par. 11, quoting AG 5.
The “special end” of the church’s mission is “the evangelization and the foundation of the church among peoples or groups in which it has not yet taken root.” 11 From these statements, it can be said that *DM* does not propose a new definition or direction for the mission of the church but rather refers to previous church pronouncements. Therefore, to understand correctly the mission of the church in this formulation, one has to base it on the earlier documents referred to. 12

The document also states that the “single but complex and articulated reality” which characterizes the mission of the church has various elements. 13 The following five principal elements embrace the “totality of Christian mission.”

1. The simple presence and living witness of the Christian life.
2. The concrete commitment to the service of mankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it.
3. The liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation.
4. The dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions.
5. The announcement and catechesis in which the good news of the Gospel is proclaimed. 14

From such an understanding of the mission of the church, section two of the document goes into the foundations and forms of dialogue. This topic will also be the focus of the following section of the article.

**DEFINITION AND GOAL OF DIALOGUE**

In the introduction of *DM*, dialogue is defined as the “new attitude” of the church toward non-Christian religions fostered by Vatican II. 15 Furthermore,

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11. Ibid., quoting AG 6.
13. Ibid. 13.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., pars. 1-3.
dialogue is a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit which guides one’s conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality towards the other. It leaves room for the other person’s identity, his modes of expression, and his values. Dialogue is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation.\textsuperscript{16}

The goal of dialogue is placed in the context of the faith of the church. The main presupposition is, the Trinity is at work in the world, even in the “great religious traditions of humanity.”\textsuperscript{17} God the Father has “hidden in creation and history” “gifts.”\textsuperscript{18} Christ has redeemed the whole world.\textsuperscript{19} The Spirit works outside the confines of the church.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore,

in the religious traditions of non-Christians there exists “elements which are true and good” (\textit{OT} 16), “precious things, both religious and human” (\textit{GS} 92), “seeds of contemplation” (\textit{AG} 18), “elements of truth and grace” (\textit{AG} 9), “seeds of the Word” (\textit{AG} 11, 15), and “rays of the truth which illuminates all mankind” (\textit{NA} 2).\textsuperscript{21}

These “values” “merit the attention and esteem of Christians, and their spiritual patrimony is a genuine invitation to dialogue, not only in those things which unite us, but also in our differences.”\textsuperscript{22} The goal of dialogue therefore, quoting \textit{AG} 11, are the following: (1) To discover the “treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth.” (2) Dialogue is to “illuminate these treasures with the light of the gospel, to set them free, and to bring them under the dominion of God their Savior.”\textsuperscript{23}

The document also mentions two kinds of dialogue: dialogue involved in missionary proclamation, and dialogue in relation to the reign of God on earth.

Missionary proclamation, one of the elements of mission mentioned in paragraph thirteen of the document, has “conver-
sion as its goal." 24 Even in seeking conversion, there can be the spirit of dialogue. 25 Since the “law of conscience is sovereign,” a person cannot be forced to leave his or her “previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself towards another.” 26 Dialogue will also enlighten a Christian who wants to share his “experience of Christ with his brother of another religion.” The Christian should understand that “it is natural that another believer would similarly desire to share his faith.” 27 But dialogue is not only an attitude in missionary proclamation that seeks conversions.

Dialogue can also be activities that will fulfill God’s eschatological reign on the earth, distinct from missionary proclamation. God works to “reconcile persons to Himself,” leading them “in history towards the fullness of truth.” God has a plan for every nation, leading to the “evangelization of cultures.” The goal of dialogue is to fulfill this plan. 28 With the “building of God’s reign,” dialogue becomes a source of hope and a factor of communion in mutual transformation. It is the Holy Spirit who directs the carrying out of God’s design in the history of individuals and all humanity until the time when God’s children who are dispersed by sin will be reunited as one. 29

MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND DIALOGUE

What, then, is the relationship between dialogue and mission in this document? Dialogue is seen as part of the mission of the church. Part of the mission of the church is missionary proclamation, with conversion as goal. The spirit of dialogue should characterize this proclamation. There is also the dialogue with other religious traditions distinct from missionary proclamation. The goal of this dialogue is to build God’s reign.

24. Ibid., par. 37.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., par. 40.
28. Ibid., par. 41.
29. Ibid., par. 43.
AN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

The second document to be considered is from the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches which met at Vancouver in 1983. Mission was not really the focus of the Assembly as the declarations would show. But one of the reports of the eight Issue Groups dealt with the subject of witnessing. The section is entitled, “Witnessing Among People of Living Faith.” This report contains a section on the relationship between witness and dialogue. But before going into the document itself, we will discuss first the understanding of mission which is the background to the document.

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The declaration of the delegates state their “commitment to mission and evangelism.” 30 This phrase alludes to the recent documents of the World Council of Churches (WCC) where an understanding of the mission of the church was propounded. Therefore, to understand the position of the 1983 Assembly on the mission of the church, we need to refer to these previous documents.

The phrase “mission and evangelism” signaled a recent development in the mission theology of the World Council of Churches. Prior to the Melbourne Conference of 1980, the phrase would have been out of line with the WCC stand on missions.31 The Melbourne Conference affirmed the Kingdom of God as the mission of the church. Scherer summarizes the stand of Melbourne:

The kingdom of God, both as a gift and as a task, stands forth as the most comprehensive biblical expression for the goal of missio Dei . . . Missio Dei means that the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy

31. Scherer sees three periods in the mission theology of the WCC. The 1948-1961 period is “characterized by an emphasis on the church as the agent of God’s mission.” The second stage was from 1961-1975, which was marked “by a shift toward the world as the locus for God’s mission.” The final period, ushered by the Melbourne Conference, once again affirmed the church as a valid instrument in
Spirit — continues to be the main actor in mission. God does not turn responsibility for mission over to the church; he himself carried it to completion, with or without the church’s cooperation . . . Properly understood, the church is an instrument of the kingdom and an eschatological foretaste of it — in that sense even a “sacrament” of the kingdom, as Melbourne suggested.\textsuperscript{32}

Melbourne saw “the Church as witnessing to the kingdom, and the kingdom as the raison d’être of the Church.”\textsuperscript{33} Section Three of the Plenary Presentation is entitled, “The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom.” The section declares that

The life and witness of our present churches is very diverse, and it is not our calling to be judges of their value to God. We can only look at some aspects of that life and witness to see how the church can more effectively carry the marks of Christ himself and be a sign of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{34}

The section identifies five areas where the church witnesses to the kingdom of God. The church witnesses in the following:

1. Proclamation of the Word of God.
2. Search for a community of living, sharing fellowship.
3. The healing community.
4. Common witness to God’s kingdom.
5. The Eucharist.\textsuperscript{35}

The explanation on “Common Witness to God’s Kingdom,” mentions dialogue as a witness activity. “Dialogue with people of living faiths can show us how they and we may serve the common needs of humanity. We may also discover that God had

\begin{footnotes}
\item the mission of God (94). See also Arthur Glasser, “Conciliar Perspectives: The Road to Reconceptualization,” Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran, Contemporary Theologies of Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 82-99.
\item Scherer, Gospel, Church, and Kingdom, 141.
\item “Section III. The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom,” in Your Kingdom Come, 193.
\item Ibid. 193-94.
\end{footnotes}
fresh inspiration for us in the experience of other religions.”

This challenge to dialogue with “people of living faiths” was further defined in Vancouver as “Witnessing Among People of Living Faiths.”

DEFINITION AND GOALS OF DIALOGUE

The Vancouver document, “Witnessing Among People of Living Faiths,” first of all confesses that “of all the things we do as Christians, witnessing among peoples of living faiths and ideologies causes the most difficulty and confusion.” For it means that while affirming the uniqueness of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to which we bear witness, we recognize God’s creative work in the seeking for religious truth among people of other faiths.

Therefore, there is “the need to distinguish between witness and dialogue, whilst at the same time affirming their inter-relatedness.” Dialogue is described as “that encounter where people holding different claims about ultimate reality can meet and explore these claims in a context of mutual respect.” The goal of dialogue is to “discern more about how God is active in our world, and to appreciate for their own sake the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of ultimate reality.” Dialogue, then, “is not a device for nor a denial of Christian witness. It is rather a mutual venture to bear witness to each other and the world, in relation to different perceptions of ultimate reality.”

MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND DIALOGUE

What then, is the relation of dialogue with the mission of the church in the ecumenical perspective? Dialogue is a form of witnessing to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not only the Christian church but also the world. God fulfills his mis-

36. Ibid. 201.  
37. Gathered for Life, 40.  
38. Ibid.  
39. Ibid.  
40. Ibid.  
41. Ibid.  
42. Ibid.
sion in the world. The church is only one of the instruments of God’s reign. Other religious traditions, with their views of ultimate reality can also witness to the work of God in their cultures and groups. Dialogue, then, celebrates the kingdom of God.

AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE

CONTEXT AND INTENTION OF THE DECLARATION

The last group of documents on dialogue and mission to investigate are the reports on the Consultation on World Evangelization, which met in 1980 at Pattaya, Thailand. Aside from the Thailand Statement, the meeting sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization also produced seventeen mini-consultation reports on reaching particular people groups for Christ. The purpose of these mini-consultations was “to consider important issues of theology and methodology, in relation to our approach to different peoples, in order to develop realistic strategies for evangelism.” Among the people groups considered were the Muslims and Hindus. The reports on these two groups contain statements about dialogue with non-Christian religions. But before the declarations about dialogue and mission are considered, the understanding of mission will be discussed first.

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Thailand Statement reaffirmed the “mandate for world evangelization.” The Statement, quoting the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, emphasized that “in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.” Two reasons for the primacy of evangelism are given in the Lausanne Covenant. First, “World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel

44. Dayton and Wilson, The Lausanne Movement, 152.
45. Ibid. 150. This was quoted from “The Lausanne Covenant,” in Let the Earth Hear His Voice, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975) 1-9, par. 6.
to the whole world.” Second, “The church is at the very center of God’s cosmic purpose and is his appointed means to spreading the Gospel.”

Evangelism “is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.” Furthermore, “The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church and responsible service in the world.”

This is the understanding of the mission of the church which undergirds the statements on dialogue in the Thailand meetings.

DEFINITION AND GOALS OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue is defined as a method that

paves the way for a sharing of experiences, and provides an opportunity for frank interchange in conversation. It provides an atmosphere in which both parties can understand each other, and creates a mutual bond of friendship and appreciation.

Dialogue is also a way of understanding “the world-views and belief systems of people of other faiths,” “a mood or spirit of friendship and cooperation.” The document gives various goals for dialogue. In the dialogue with members of different faiths, the Christian “learns how another person gives meaning and significance to life.” Furthermore,

a Christian is able to appreciate in depth what his neighbour believes and what is the nature of his religious experience. Also, in these days of widespread poverty, social disruption, and war, it is vital for followers of different faiths to co-operate in pursuing peace and social justice for all.

47. Ibid., par. 4.
50. Ibid.
Yet, these goals are only secondary to a greater aim. The reports are very clear on the chief goal of dialogue.

In dialogue we seek to share our different beliefs, theological systems, experiences, and plans. But we also seek to proclaim that which is not simply ours but God’s, which is not meant just for us, but for all men, which presents a categorical demand not just for us, but for all. The aim of dialogue must most surely be to learn and to appreciate, but it must chiefly be to teach and to tell men and women about Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.51

The report, *Christian Witness to Hindus*, states that sharing, understanding each other, friendship and appreciation must not be the end. Dialogue “must lead to proclaiming Christ as Lord.”52 The positions just stated also meant rejection of the other meanings of dialogue.

The document rejects the idea that dialogue should not be used for “proselytisation.” If “proselytisation” means violating the freedom and integrity of another, then, indeed dialogue should not be such. But since Christians are called to witness at all times, “it is incumbent upon us to witness with the greatest sensitivity and sympathy; but witness we must, even, and perhaps especially, in the context of dialogue.”53

The document also rejects the notion of dialogue as “mutual witnessing,” of Christian truth complemented by other religions. If “mutual witnessing” means dialogue partners sharing their respective positions, then this kind is acceptable. For indeed, “the Christian can learn much from the life-style, devotion, or learning of the other.” But dialogue understood as a means of achieving “a ‘rounded’ knowledge of God and his will” from listening to the witness of other religions is not acceptable.54

51. Ibid. 23.
54. “The Lausanne Covenant” states, “We affirm that there is only one Savior and only one Gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies” (par. 3).
MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND DIALOGUE

Dialogue is an integral part of Christian mission. This is the stand of the document. Dialogue is understood mainly as a sensitive listening in order to understand the other better, or of cooperation in different ways of service for the sake of the Gospel. Having examined the Roman Catholic, ecumenical, and evangelical perspectives from one specific document, these are the conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

The document "The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions" identified two kinds of dialogue. First is the dialogue with other religions involved in missionary proclamation. Distinct from the first is the second kind. It is the dialogue which seeks to find seeds of truth in other religions with no proclamation in view. Both kinds of dialogue are part of the mission of the church.

The ecumenical perspective is deduced from the declarations of the Sixth Assembly in 1983. Dialogue is defined as "mutual" witness of both Christians and members of other religions, sharing with each other the religious truths God has given their religions. Dialogue is also seen as part of the task of the church, which is to witness to the kingdom of God.

The evangelical perspective of dialogue sees it as a means to evangelization. The Thailand Statement and Reports recognize various goals for dialogue but place primacy on evangelization. Dialogue as sensitive listening and learning from the other is seen as part of the mission of the church to evangelize the whole world.

From this survey, similarities and differences between the three perspectives can be concluded.

The three views on dialogue agree on the point that dialogue is part of the mission of the church. Therefore, there is no question on the importance of dialogue in relation to the mission of the church. The differences lie on how dialogue is defined. On

55. Ibid. 23.
one hand is the position of the World Council of Churches that dialogue should not be connected to conversion at all. On the other hand is the belief of the evangelicals that all dialogue should lead to proclamation, whether the message is accepted or not. The Roman Catholic position is in-between: there is the dialogue that should be part of proclamation, and the kind that is an end in itself. So the common point between evangelicals and Catholics is that they include dialogue in missionary proclamation.

All three views also agree that dialogue is a means of learning from other religions. The assumption of course is that there is truth in other religions. But in the value of these truths from other religions, the three views differ. For the evangelicals, though there is some knowledge of God in other religions, this knowledge does not lead to salvation. Therefore, dialogue is a means to clearer and effective proclamation of the way to salvation. On the other hand, both the Catholic and ecumenical documents teach the salvific value of truths in other religions. Dialogue becomes a sharing among equals.