

Called to transforming discipleship in North-Western Europe

Some reflections on witnessing in secular contexts

EEMC Study Document

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1. *Introduction*

The Arusha conference theme ‘Moving in the Spirit: Called to transforming discipleship’ reflects central notions of the 2013 mission affirmation Together Towards Life (TTL). Throughout the affirmation, but especially so in paragraphs 24-35, it is highlighted that in order to be an empowered church on the move, the Christian community needs to discern the presence of the life-giving Spirit in this world and is called to respond by journeying with Christ into critical locations of human struggle and into meeting points with others. This transformative journey of Christ’s disciples, in which the Spirit is accompanying us, is both life-giving and costly. TTL challenges us to rethink the essence of witnessing of Christ, calls for repentance and offers a taste of life in its fullness.

In this paper we aim to reflect on transforming discipleship in the secular contexts of Europe and to describe some of the specific challenges these contexts pose for being missional communities and doing mission. At different occasions voices and studies, not only but also from churches in the Global South, express alarmed worries about Christianity on this continent. For some of them a spectre is haunting the churches of Europe – the spectre of secularisation – that is most visible in the rapid decline of their membership numbers. The explanation offered is that this decline of the churches is direct result of their extensive assimilation with destructive trends and poisoned values of secularism, such as liberalism, individualism, materialism, rationalism and relativism. The churches in Europe, they contend, look like the ‘prodigal son’ deliberately giving away their rich heritage, resulting in a profound lack of discipleship, weakness of mission and a fading grasp of the Good News. In this perspective the secularised regions of North-West Europe are viewed as seemingly abandoned by the Holy Spirit. Empty churches and the decline in numbers are hence a result of a lost evangelistic zeal. Therefore Europeans deserve compassion and they need empowering help from elsewhere: recapturing secular Europe for Christianity, regaining spiritual and evangelistic power, they state, may only be possible by the support of vibrant centres of Christianity in the South or the East. Initiatives motivated by such a diagnosis are often labelled as ‘reverse mission.’ They can happen through missionary activities or the powerful presence of migrant churches in countries of Europe.

One purpose of this paper is to open a debate on such differing perceptions of secularisation, especially in North-Western Europe, making it a seemingly exceptional case. Keeping that in mind we will start by commenting on the notion of secularisation in TTL and stating that its description is problematic in relation to current and future practices of mission and evangelism.

2. The European contexts

It is hardly possible to speak about Europe as a single context for mission. Europe represents a rich variety of cultures, peoples, languages and histories. Whoever wants to move in the Spirit and shape transforming discipleship, will need to take into account that Europe has multiple contexts, both secular and multi-religious, and increasingly intercultural as a result of migration. Moreover, there are considerable differences between the countries in North-western, South-eastern and Eastern Europe, for instance where it concerns state-church relationships.

Yet it is fair to say that all over Europe, though in different degrees, a new situation has emerged that is often referred to in terms of secularisation, post-Christendom and post-Christianity. For centuries in Europe there were close ties between those who were in secular positions of power and church leadership, laws were said to be based on Christian principles and virtually every member of society was assumed to be a church member. In European history 'Christian' governments were responsible for bringing their subjects into the realm of the church and churches to legitimise the rule of these governments.

These views are no longer upheld. In the processes of secularisation church and state were separated over time. This brought about a change in the position of the church, ending its many privileges. In today's secular society people are free to choose to be religious or not, to be a Christian, Muslim or agnostic. People go to church if they are intrinsically motivated to do so, as being a citizen does no longer imply membership of a church, and today being a Christian no longer is an advantage in career planning or social standing. Religion became an affair of church, synagogue, mosque and temple, of the private individual rather than of the state. Christianity is no longer an integrating force in society, but one of its segments.

Although most of its history is deeply marked by Christianity, Europe has nowadays largely left behind the idea of being a Christian continent. It is a continent on which still live large numbers of Christians, but the sharp decline in church membership and participation in church activities is regarded as the most visible sign of change. This change is accelerating in the younger generation and hence differing stages of secularisation can be observed in the generations and also the social strata which form the present North-Western European societies.

This does not mean, however, that the role of Christianity in Europe, or of religion for that matter, has ended. Though many have chosen to no longer be a member of a church or to no longer actively participate in church activities, they will yet identify themselves as 'spiritual' people who do hold some sort of faith. Next to this reality we can observe another development, as both in the political arena and in public debate the growing presence of Muslim minorities in Europe has led to renewed discussions about the role of religion in society and about the significance of our Christian heritage. This increasingly leads to the realisation that the European contexts are multi-faceted: they are both secular and multi-religious.

Specific for North-Western Europe is that the secularisation processes in formerly strongly Christian societies, now increasingly cross and interact with a growing plurality of religious expressions. To be more precise, a growing number of religious communities, being confronted by these same processes, have to define how they understand and live in a secular yet multi-religious society. To put it differently: The debates are not on religion vs. secular

society, but on the question how various religious communities understand and engage with secular society and religious plurality. These understandings vary widely, also among Christians, and so the understanding of secular society has become one of the hot issues among the religious communities.

3. Our understanding of secular culture

This paper, of course, is not the place to ship the ocean of publications on secularisation and secularism in the last decades. These publications have shown a tremendous change in the discussion. Also the ecumenical mission movement addressed this issue, as already was the case at the second World Missionary Conference in Jerusalem (1928). These debates cannot be reviewed here, but they should be kept in mind when engaging with the topics involved.

a) Secular in TTL

Now, looking at the way TTL refers to secular contexts, we find that it overlooks the complexities and intricacies of the secular contexts European Christians live in and witness to. Notably in TTL 91, the mission affirmation juxtaposes the term secularism with ‘ideologies that challenges the values of the kingdom of God’. A definition of the term is not provided and it remains unclear how secularism is understood in relation to, or in distinction from ‘secularisation’ and/or ‘secular’. When discussing the missionary calling to transforming discipleship in secular contexts, such as in Europe, the juxtaposition becomes problematic if secularism is not distinguished from secularisation. TTL 91 creates the impression that being ‘secular’ is the opposite of Kingdom values, as much as individualism and materialism. This, however, may well be grounded in a one-sided understanding of what secular and secularisation entitles. Secular society as such cannot be understood as the opposite of faith, mission or Kingdom values. It is more complicated than that.

b) Secular no opposite of faith

We contend that secular society is not the result of failing mission or a failure to shape transforming discipleship. We observe that both in diaspora theologies, in reverse mission in Europe and in some churches in the global South secular society in North-western Europe is often regarded as the result of failing discipleship and of lacking missionary zeal. Proposed remedies such as ‘Ground yourselves in biblical truths’ or ‘Be stronger in your faith’ tend to overlook that secular contexts cannot simply be re-Christianised and, second, that secularisation is in part also the fruit of the Christian tradition.

Secular society is the context in which mission and discipleship take place in North-Western Europe. If it is an ecumenical conviction that God’s Spirit moves in the world and in its cultures, working towards its redemption and creating life, then the Spirit also works within secular Western societies. It then is the calling of the church in these contexts to discern how and where the Spirit works towards affirming life and provides divine space for making disciples. Transforming discipleship then, should not be directed to oppose secular culture, but should in witnessing and discerning resonate with that context. Its invitation cannot be that people should de-secularise in order to become Christians. It seeks, instead, to identify the contours of salvation that have already been created by the Spirit, while also discerning the life-denying forces and idols that obstruct salvation and accepting the call to discipleship.

In our understanding secular North-western European societies have been shaped by the Christian tradition. Through various processes a legal distinction has been drawn between the role of churches in the private and in the public spheres (in relation to political institutions). That doesn't imply that the secular context is Christian as such, but at the same time its emergence cannot be understood apart from Christianity and from its impact on history and culture. The plurality in both the former roles of churches in European societies and in socio-political developments have created a diversity of secular societies, even in countries that may seem quite similar, such as the Netherlands, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. In these countries, churches are formed by people deeply influenced by secular values and ways of living. Their ways of searching for, of living and expressing their faith are in themselves secularised and so the dividing line cannot be simply drawn between church and society.

Furthermore, the understanding of what it means to be church is deeply shaped by contextual theological reflections of the churches in these countries about the best way to witness to Christ and to reach out to the people who make up these societies. Many churches understand the urgency of church renewal and a transformed understanding of discipleship in secular contexts and have developed many initiatives, but they experience that church decline cannot be countered by revivalism or ardent faith. Many people, who live in secular contexts, in particular more and more among the younger generations, have lost the connection to faith and are un-churched or de-churched in the course of their lives.

Questions for dialogue: Where do you draw the separating line between secular and religious spheres in your region or context?

4. Blessings and challenges of secular culture

There are no easy answers for those who are engaged in mission in such secular contexts. First of all they have to realize that living in these contexts brings a 'mixed bag' of blessings and challenges. We have observed that the focus in TTL 91 may be on secular contexts as permeated by ideologies that are in opposition to Kingdom values, but the reality is more complex than that. As in any culture there is both 'sweet and bitter', blessing and challenge (though challenges do not necessarily have to be 'bitter' when they are understood eschatologically in terms of hope).

a) Freedom of religion

Among the blessings of secular society ranges, maybe first and foremost, the freedom of religion and the freedom to gather for religious meetings. In the so-called Christian era of Europe individuals could not choose and/or change their religious affiliation. Persecution, expulsion or flight because of religious intolerance has triggered some major waves of migration and of violence in European history. In that perspective the separation between the religious and the secular realm, between ecclesiastical and political power, is also an expression of a long and painful learning process, both of church and society, as we have been reminded again lately in the Reformation jubilee 2017. Today, religious freedom includes beyond the individuals' freedom the freedom for church and mission to act in the public sphere. They may invite people to join in worship and to become disciples and may speak out against injustice in society. Faith continues to play a role in people's lives, even though membership of religious institutions is declining.

Freedom of religion in secular societies implies that there are multiple spaces for religious expression. There is space for adherents of all religions and convictions, including spiritual movements and even new religions. *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, the ecumenical 2011 recommendations for conduct, relates the freedom of religion to the freedom for mission. As Christians we are free to evangelize and to call to discipleship, as long as we keep in mind that the other always has the freedom to decide *not* to accept the invitation. People are free to choose and have the right *not* to be coerced or dominated by religious convictions. It includes, as stated in the document, that the freedom to do mission is a freedom for all, not only for Christians. In our secular contexts Christian mission cannot have any legitimacy if it doesn't include upholding the right of people of other religions to invite as well to embrace their faith.

Question for dialogue: How are these aspects assessed in contexts where Christians and churches are in a minority situation?

b) *Being secular and having faith*

Within the limitations of this paper we would like to point also to a number of challenges for mission in secular contexts. One of the first that comes to our minds is that many (secular, un-churched/de-churched) people who live in secular societies hold that being secular is the *opposite* of having faith (being religious). Thus, they share the misleading understanding of a secular society as mentioned above. The conclusion they draw from that assumption is that faith is not about truth claims or shared values, but a personal opinion and thus belongs to the private sphere. When religion poses a threat to society that is treated as an exception, such as terrorism using religion for legitimizing itself. Then the public in our societies is involved in discussions about how to cope with religious convictions which lead to extremism and violence. They then often call for more laws and restrictions on religion in the public sphere.

Although it is a widespread opinion that religious convictions are not relevant in the public sphere and debate, in none of the countries of those who wrote this paper the conclusion has been drawn to ban religion from public institutions and public debates – unlike in France, for instance. The general debate is more about whether it still is meaningful to call a society 'Christian' even if the majority is not practicing Christian faith anymore. In our North-Western European countries we observe that the societies are to a certain extent permeated by Christian values, but that these values are not necessarily labelled 'Christian' by its secularised citizens. One example is the felt obligation, both for individuals as well as for the public institutions, to assist and help groups which have been identified as being weak and marginalized. And the reverse is also true: A growing sense of populisms leads to an attitude that wants to fight off refugees and migrants with the argument that they do not share the values of the Christian Occident.

c) *Being secular and the God-question*

A second challenge is how the God-question has been affected. In the sixties and seventies of the last century – with its debates on socialism, communism and an aggressive type of secularism – the critical question to Christians was: 'How can you believe in God if science

seems to prove that God does not exist?' These debates are almost mute today because, as a result of secularisation processes and post-modernity, it is felt that people may privately believe whatever they want. Nowadays, many Northern Europeans regard atheists who propagate the non-existence of God as outdated and old-fashioned as those who claim that God exists.

From this follows that faith is for many in North-Western Europe irrelevant, not because it is about God and beliefs but because it is not more than a personal opinion. When critical contemporaries question the churches and its members, it is rather about questions like how 'modern' people can affiliate themselves with a religious institution (a church) which is, justified or not, considered as unacceptably rich and powerful. And which is held responsible for many evils in the past (such as aligning itself with colonialism, burning witches and opposing science) and which in modern times continues to be anti-modern in its morality and exclusive dogmatism. Religion, and especially religious mission, is seen by many as the cause and catalyst of social tension and conflict. In their opinion institutional religion pressures, manipulates and radicalizes people and does not contribute to much needed social cohesion, peace building and recognizing the unique contribution each person can make. The on going conflict in the Middle East, with its highly visible aspect of politicised and militant religion, has greatly impacted secular views on religions in the European context, including Christian religion.

d) *Being secular and Christian values*

As already mentioned above mainstream post-Christians have a tendency to portray institutional Christianity as old-fashioned and highly irrelevant. Usually they regard mission as one of the indicators that support this view. This leads us to yet another challenge for church and mission in secular contexts. Many may have left Christian faith behind them, but that does not mean that they are necessarily un-Christian in their ethical and moral views. Post-Christian citizens of North-Western Europe may still value Christian beliefs and practices. This creates new challenges for calling people to discipleship, as Christian faith (the good news of Christ Jesus) and Christian church (institution) need to be distinguished. One could argue that secularisation processes are a dimension of the emancipation processes of Gospel and Church from the Christendom era in Europe. Today they form the context in which Gospel and culture have to be discerned.

Questions for dialogue: Remembering the ecumenical debates on Gospel and Culture – how is such a discernment done in other countries, be it that Christians are in a majority or minority position?

e) *Religious illiteracy*

A last challenge we would like to mention here, is a growing religious illiteracy in times that actually require an increased knowledge of the role and place of religion in secular contexts. Vis-à-vis the increasing religious plurality of European societies and the growing (and sometimes conflictive) role of religions on the world stage, the lacking knowledge of religions is, to say the least, not helpful in finding mechanisms to cope with current changes. In our

North-Western European contexts, multi-religious and secular at the same time, the competency to understand and to relate to religion and religious expressions, and being able to discern between extreme fundamentalist expressions and views which are conducive for a harmonious life in society, must be further developed.

The relatively high degree of religious illiteracy does not only apply to people who are indifferent to religion, but it concerns many Christians as well. Shaping fruitful mission in a secular context therefore also requires education of Christians, not only on faith but on religions and religious practices as well. Christians need to become sensitive to the positive contributions religion(s) can make to secular contexts. In this regard it is important for missionary work in the North-Western European contexts to keep in mind what is pointed out in the document *Christian witness in a multi-religious world* (2011)^[4], namely that Christians should make efforts to understand other religions from the point of view of its adherents and not give false witness about them. The Christian desire that the good news of Christ be heard requires our willingness to truthfully represent the views of others.

Questions for dialogue: The latter is an insight which the 'Christian Witness' document reinforced from a worldwide perspective for us in North-Western Europe. How is this point seen in your context? What does it mean for your mission to speak true witness about other religions and faiths?

5. Discipleship in such contexts

We have, very briefly, outlined some issues regarding the North-Western European secular contexts and the challenges. In what follows we intend to focus on the question what transforming discipleship in these secular North-Western European contexts entitles. In doing so we are aware of the wider ecumenical debates about mission and evangelism in the past decades. It is easy to observe that there have been numerous approaches to discipleship, sometimes seemingly irreconcilable in its perspectives on the relationship of the Kingdom, church, world and the individual. Some, in their theological reflections, have upheld the hermeneutical necessity of taking a starting point in the church and developing the understanding of the world from the ecclesial perspective, while others have proposed the reverse, maintaining the importance of listening to the world first and then deciding what following Christ entitles. Some have highlighted the great commission (Matthew 28:19-20), understood as a mission to invite people to discipleship by making a personal choice to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and thereby joining the Christian family and sharing in new life. Others have emphasized Luke 4: 17-21 and Jesus' message of good news to the oppressed. Discipleship is then primarily understood in terms of testifying to the transformative power of God's Spirit, embodied in the renewal of human life and creation as a whole. Still others perceive discipleship as being led, transformed and empowered by the healing activity of God's miracle-working Spirit. Others again understand discipleship as being a follower of Jesus in a multi-religious and multi-cultural world, while discerning with whom they can partner in a pilgrimage for justice and peace.

Remarkably, after some decades in which the call to discipleship hardly surfaced in ecumenical debate, again it now moves to the centre stage of missional discussions. Not only is discipleship the theme of the CWME mission conference in Arusha, but also Pope Francis emphasized the importance of 'missionary discipleship' – writing that 'in all the baptized (...)

the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization’– while the Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Movement made a plea for intensive efforts that should be given to ‘whole life discipleship’ of all Christians, which is said to mean ‘to live, think, work and speak from a Biblical worldview and with missional effectiveness in every place or circumstance in daily life and work’.

a) *Diverse perspectives as aspects of the one call*

In our reflections on transforming discipleship it is important to keep in mind that these differing emphases in ecumenical debate and practice do not necessarily exclude each other. In the North-Western European contexts, for two reasons, we aim to value and understand the differing perspectives on discipleship as *aspects* of the call to discipleship and all aspects are needed to understand discipleship in its fullness.

The first reason is a theological one: As observed by B. Conner, its unifying core and affirmation is that Christian discipleship hinges on following Jesus. The varying perspectives can all subscribe to Bonhoeffer’s description of the call to discipleship as ‘Follow me, run along behind me’. The other reason is contextual in nature. It has to do with the secular, plural and multi-religious North-Western European contexts: People searching for orientation find a multitude of churches and denominations which emphasize different aspects of discipleship, including underlying evaluations of the multitude or plurality of religions and the secular context. When we discuss the meaning of discipleship in our contexts of course we should speak about the ‘call to Christ’. At the very same time, however, another reflective step is required as our very understanding of discipleship needs to be transformed. This transformation is necessary in order to assure that our discipleship corresponds with, and is relevant for, the particular secular North-Western European setting. Secondly, this step is necessary in order that discipleship continues be a call for unity in witness, without becoming a call for uniformity.

Question for dialogue: What position is given to discipleship in debates of your church? Do you feel the need to contextualize your call to discipleship as well?

b) *The pneumatological shift in perspective*

In such a setting the perspective changes: Discipleship is then transformed from going out to address the other into walking together. It is a process in which the disciples will readily share Good News, while also being transformed by the presence of the other. Such a transformation of discipleship is *both* about reflecting how best to reach out and invite others to walk the same path *and* it is a profound change of attitude. It concerns a transformation from sharing the truth that one believes to own, to being transformed by the Spirit through the encounters with others during the common journey towards peace and dignity for all in a secular society.

Recent mission documents have emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit as the agent of mission in this world. This is particularly true for *Together Towards Life*. We understand the affirmation that we are moved by the Spirit as a theological answer to the question how we, both as individuals and as communities, perceive God’s activity and witness to his presence in

this world and in our personal lives. To call people to discipleship, as TTL submits, then is to communicate the Gospel intentionally. First of all this is perceived as a confident yet humble call for *metanoia*, ‘an invitation to personal conversion to a new life in Christ and to discipleship’. Understood within the framework of the Spirit’s activity in the world and of our participation as witnesses, this call is for all of us to hear and accept, including those who already identify themselves as witnesses of Christ. Discipleship is not primarily, or only, proclamation of believers to those who have not heard the Gospel yet, but it is directed to both believers and those who hold other convictions.

What is more: Those in the secular contexts we are engaging with have their own wisdom. As already mentioned earlier, this wisdom is often spiritual, somehow Christian or even post-Christian, and its proponents don’t wait to be invited by the church but are actively involved in creating expressions of their beliefs and spaces to practice it. Reflections about this in the light of the Spirit’s presence in secular cultures, results in yet another challenge: We are challenged to accept that our discipleship will be transformed through encountering others, as our discipleship is shaped in a dialogue with secular culture and with the people who live in secular contexts. Even though, as Christians, we know where we come from and what motivates us, the destiny of our journey is in part determined by others as well, as others who join the journey will dialogue with us based on their values, wisdom and passion.

c) *The prophetic shift in perspective*

The Catholic theologian S. Bevans proposed to shape Christian witness in such situations as a prophetic dialogue. This involves spelling out the promises and challenges of the Gospel: discerning both the destructive activity of spirits and the healing work of the Spirit. It involves being in dialogue with those we encounter, inviting others to participate in that journey, as well as making the transformation of *life* the primary missional objective. This challenges all of us to be witnesses of abundant life, as it is embodied for us in Christ and in the values of the Kingdom which will be brought into a dialogue with the values of others. A focus on abundant life may help to relate the message of God’s mercy and reconciliation to people who live in secular contexts and who yearn to find meaning and meaningful life. It may help to develop the notion that there is enough if we share, so that justice, liberation and mercy can flourish and make good and meaningful life accessible for everyone.

As disciples we are called to witness to God and to the redeeming work of Christ, but whether or not people accept the invitation to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, or whether they feel that we are sharing values and attitudes which are conducive for the end we are proclaiming, that is left open and not up to us to answer. We hope that people will join us in following Jesus, but ultimately that is *Sache Gottes*, as the mission is God’s (*missio Dei*): the Spirit calls and moves the heart, it is not us. It is God who leads people to conversion through the work of the Spirit.

This is widely accepted in ecumenical debates. For us in the North-Western European contexts it means that we are called to humbly point to Christ as the embodiment of life and salvation. Such humility is very relevant for mission in our North-Western European contexts. In shaping and doing evangelism we need to assume that the people we are witnessing to already have deeply rooted opinions and convictions about the Christian message. Many of them may feel that the Gospel is irrelevant to them, or worse even, that old-fashioned

Christianity is detrimental to one's mental state and severely hampers human autonomy and individuality. But, as pointed out, many still hold Christian convictions while opposing the church.

Question for dialogue: Does such an interpretation of practising a "prophetic dialogue" resonate in your context?

d) *Discipleship as a twofold call*

In light of the above we understand discipleship in our secular North-Western European contexts as a twofold call. First as the call of the Spirit to followers of Jesus to move, to embark on a hopeful journey towards God's Kingdom and second as the call to join others in their life-centred journey. In doing so we celebrate and share the joy of Christ's Gospel in an invitational and respectful manner.

Joining the journey, however, should not prescribe conversion as a prerequisite. Wide recognition has grown that *metanoia* is a process rather than a fixed moment in time. During the journey faith in Christ may grow and mature, but those who have joined the journey are free to decline the invitation to believe that the good news of Christ has ultimate significance, or to decline the invitation to join a common journey altogether. People may embark on the common journey for various reasons. Maybe they do so because of shared values and a longing for justice and peace. Or we may share a spiritual longing for fulfilment and purpose. Be that as it may, it is our calling as disciples of Christ to humbly share what the life, death and resurrection of Christ means in our individual lives, our faith communities and what it may contribute to a common journey towards life and peace.

This attitude is also reflected in the document *Christian witness in a multi-religious world*, which relates witnessing of Christ to an invitation to fight with others – of other faith or of no faith – for life in abundance for all. This underscores the interrelatedness and mutual dependence of proclamation and discernment as a dual dimension of discipleship in such contexts.

Question for dialogue: Have you engaged with this document and if so, have you read it in this perspective of such a twofold call?

Certainly the call to discipleship as such has not lost significance and relevance in secular contexts, even though many de-churched people in our societies may feel differently. Yet though it is as relevant as it was in New Testament times, the shape of discipleship in our North-Western European contexts requires transformation, as journeying with Christ takes place in a rapidly changing cultural context. As many European societies have moved into a post-Christian, secular yet multi-religious and intercultural era, the call to discipleship not only needs to be affirmed, but also re-contextualized. Failing to do so overlooks that for many Christianity and the Christian message have become incredible, unattractive and irrelevant. Both 'Fresh expressions of church' (with its emphasis on the shaping of new missional faith communities) and church initiatives that seek new ways to live in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers in European societies (including efforts to defend their legal and human

rights) are authentic expressions of a transformed and contextual understanding of discipleship in North-Western European churches. These understandings include appreciation of the manifold expressions of Christian faith in our societies both within and beyond our churches and they also have a keen eye for spaces people have discovered and created for themselves in order to live and express what they believe in or what centres their life.

Question for dialogue: Could you identify in your contexts expressions of life-centeredness outside the churches with which you were willing to engage?

e) *Discipleship as Evangelism*

In our efforts to respond to the process of secularisation and dwindling church membership, churches in the European contexts have recently placed a renewed and remarkable emphasis on evangelism. This is also reflected in *Together Towards Life*, especially so in paragraph 72, which speaks about new missional initiatives in the secular global North, such as the already mentioned ‘fresh expressions of church’, ‘new monasticism’ and ‘emerging church’.

In their renewed emphasis on evangelism churches in the secular North-Western European contexts discovered that calling people to discipleship requires re-reading the Gospel and the secular context. It doesn’t suffice to speak about salvation and liberation if churches fail to make clear what fullness of life may look like in prosperous secular contexts and what it is that we need to be saved from.

In our efforts to gain a transformed, contextual understanding of discipleship we need to remind ourselves that prosperity is not everybody’s experience in North-Western European societies. Many Europeans are on a quest for meaningful life, professional/personal fulfilment or meaningful relationships. In secular societies the values of individuality and autonomy find its downside in individualism and loneliness. Homeless or long term unemployed people, single mothers on social security or migrants without residence permit may serve as just a few examples of people, who have little access to the benefits of prosperous Western societies.

We need to keep in mind as well that for large sections in our North-Western European societies it won’t do to invite people to join the common journey, as they are already (in varying degrees) engaged, in what Christians are calling for. People in secular contexts will often feel that Christians have only seldom been ready to align themselves with those who were fighting injustice and that secularised, post-Christian Europeans have done so for a long time already. It therefore doesn’t suffice if North-Western European churches speak of salvation and the call to discipleship without realizing which aspects of secularity can be regarded as life-affirming and which are to be regarded as life-denying.

Question for dialogue: Could you identify such secular trends in your context? And if so, would you be able to characterize some of them as life-affirming or life-denying?

We stated above that ‘secular’ is not the opposite of ‘faith’ or ‘being religious’ as such, but that it should be regarded as a characteristic of the context in which both Christians and others live. This has implications for the way we publically engage in mission. For one thing, contextual mission in secular contexts then requires that we constantly relate Christian beliefs (Gospel values) to secular values and to bring this into a dialogue in the public sphere. It is,

then, also about finding life-affirming allies, partnering for the sake of the common good and embarking on a joint pilgrimage for justice and peace.

f) *Discipleship as advocacy*

In that line we propose to understand advocacy work (in which many churches and Christians of Europe engage) as a form of discipleship adequate to secular contexts. Advocacy is understood here basically as engaging and advocating for the rights of others. Although one may see human rights with good reasons as Christian values people own these rights while being citizens of secular societies. Christians in advocacy will fight for those to whom these rights are denied, independently from whether they may – or may not – consider to be (come) Christian. In doing so they witness to people who may have a different faith or profess no faith, but who still should be won for the perspective and values promoted by advocacy and public theology – like fighting for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation and liberation – and for whom such values are valid, without the premise that they should become Christians first.

Question for dialogue: Are there similar understanding of churches' engagement in your context? How would you assess advocacy as a dimension of our mission?

g) *Discipleship as celebration*

The above being said, the call to discipleship is all about a journey of faith that celebrates the incarnation of Christ, the gift of new life through his death and resurrection, and the hope of the Kingdom. While in the fifties and sixties of the last century discipleship was often understood in terms of leaving the isolation of the 'ecclesial enclave' and improving the humane functioning of society, we now tend to increasingly underline the relationship of discipleship and worship. This ecclesial turn in our reflections on discipleship recognizes that the turn to the world in solidarity cannot be separated from a turn to the worship of the Triune God, who created the world and will bring it to fulfilment.

Though we cannot limit discipleship to initiation and participation in church life, discipleship is intrinsically related to the community of Jesus' followers and to its faith practices. As is stated in the WCC report *Evangelism Today: New Ways for Authentic Discipleship* (2014) discipleship is rooted in Christ. It is in worship that we celebrate this rootedness in Christ. In sharing in the gift of the sacraments the faith community is related to and in communion with God. We agree with Conner that liturgical formation is an essential part of discipleship, as it shapes and nurtures faith and faith practices. As such worship provides space for developing lenses that enable believers to live as disciples in the secular contexts of North-Western Europe, to announce the good news of Christ in a contextual way and to journey with others for the common good of the created world.

Question for dialogue: How do you and your churches see the relation between discipleship and worship on the one hand, and discipleship as solidarity with the world on the other?

Concluding question: In how far could you imagine to engage with that journey of Christians and Churches in Europe?

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