

# Mission as Participation in God's Redemptive Work

## Introduction

The word *mission* is derived from the Latin *missio*, meaning "to be sent." In ecclesiastical terminology, it refers to the Church's commissioning to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. Far from being a mere institutional enterprise, mission is fundamentally the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. The Church participates in this divine movement, sent by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness to God's love, justice, and reconciliation in the world (Bosch, 1991; Bevans and Schroeder, 2004).

## The Scriptural Foundation of Mission

The most prominent scriptural foundation for mission is the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:16–20. Here, the risen Christ declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (RSV, 1966). The text serves as both a theological anchor and a practical mandate. It is crucial to note that Jesus issues this command to the eleven remaining disciples, an imperfect number symbolising the Church's fallibility. As Bruner (1990) notes, Jesus commissions an "elevenish" Church to carry out a perfect mission. This paradox highlights the nature of divine grace: God chooses to work through broken vessels. In this context, mission is not merely a programme but an identity. The disciples are called not only to go but to teach, baptise, and make disciples, embodying the life and teachings of Jesus. Mission is thus inseparable from discipleship.

## The Aim of the Mission

The aim of the mission is participation in God's salvific plan for humanity and all creation. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is invited to cooperate in the unfolding of God's Kingdom, a reality marked by justice, peace, and the restoration of all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). Mission is holistic; it encompasses evangelism, discipleship, acts of compassion, and advocacy for justice (Bosch, 1991; Escobar, 2003). This comprehensive vision was captured by Bosch (1991, p. 519) who asserts, "Mission is the church sent into the world to love, to serve, to preach, to teach and to liberate." Thus, mission cannot be reduced to proselytisation; it is a dynamic and inclusive process, marked by the integrity of presence and action.

## The Role of the Missionary

Missionaries are not spiritual imperialists delivering a pre-packaged God; rather, they are pilgrims and companions, called to listen, learn, and witness within specific cultural contexts. As Faulkner (2000) suggests, the first task of the missionary is to enter the lives of the people, sharing in their struggles, hopes, and faith journeys. The missionary seeks not to bring God, but to recognise and affirm God's presence already at work.

This theology of accompaniment is powerfully illustrated in the anonymous poem:

*Help us discover our own riches... Be with us, a companion who walks with us... in our search for life and, ultimately, for God.*

This reflects a shift from a colonial to a dialogical paradigm of mission, one that emphasises mutual transformation and solidarity (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004). Integral mission, a concept widely embraced in contemporary missiology, underlines that proclaiming the Gospel includes addressing poverty, injustice, and suffering (Padilla, 2004).

### **Contemporary Contexts of Mission**

The traditional model of mission, Europe to the rest of the world, has been replaced by a polycentric reality. The majority of Christians now reside in the Global South, and mission is increasingly characterised by reciprocity and intercultural exchange (Jenkins, 2011; Howles, 2023). Modern mission includes a wide range of expressions: digital evangelism, advocacy for the environment, reconciliation in post-conflict societies, and more. The advent of social media and digital technologies has opened new frontiers for Gospel proclamation and community formation (YWAM Nuremberg, 2023).

Pope Francis (2023) has stressed the need for theology and mission to address “the wounds of humanity and creation.” He calls for a contextual theology that engages the suffering, promotes dialogue, and resists exclusion. In this vision, mission becomes not only an outward journey but an inward conversion to humility, mercy, and communion.

### **The Missionary’s Identity and Spirituality**

The missionary vocation is rooted in a spirituality of presence and vulnerability. Cardinal Suhard’s poignant observation, “Live in such a way that your life would make no sense if God did not exist”, invites missionaries to radical dependence on God. This lifestyle challenges the idolatries of modern culture, including consumerism, celebrity, and individualism.

Missionaries today must also be contemplatives in action, nourished by Scripture, prayer, and sacramental life. Their spiritual rhythm enables them to discern the movements of the Spirit, even in unfamiliar or resistant contexts. As Radcliffe (2001) argues, missionaries offer wisdom through their epiphanic presence, embodying the Gospel as much as proclaiming it. Moreover, identity is shaped not in isolation but in relationships. As missionaries encounter the other, they too are transformed. This echoes Faulkner’s (2000) insight: in meeting the religious other, we discover aspects of Christ that our own traditions may have obscured.

### **Conclusion**

Mission is not a one-way act of giving, but a mutual encounter of grace. Rooted in Scripture and animated by the Spirit, it is the Church’s joyful participation in God’s project of redemption. In an age marked by fragmentation and disillusionment, the Church is called to bear witness to hope through her presence, practices, and proclamation. The missional Church must be contemplative, humble, and courageous, ever ready to discern the face of Christ in unexpected places. Through dialogue, solidarity, and proclamation, missionaries help reveal the Kingdom of God already among us and still to come.

## References

- AP News. (2023). *Pope presses theologians to be in tune with challenges of daily life and talk with non-believers*. [online] Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/9a3b26243be84f1e5f34e9ba2d823c54> [Accessed 27 May 2025].
- Bevans, S. B. and Schroeder, R. P. (2004). *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Bosch, D. J. (1991). *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Bruner, F. D. (1990). *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing.
- Escobar, S. (2003). *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Faulkner, M. (2000). "Mission" in *Perspective on Mission*. London: St. Joseph's College.
- Howles, C. (2023). *Mission Hits #52 (September 2023)*. From Every Nation. Available at: <https://www.fromeverynation.net/post/mission-hits-52-september-2023> [Accessed 27 May 2025].
- Jenkins, P. (2011). *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Padilla, R. (2004). *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom*. Carlisle: Langham Monographs.
- Radcliffe, T. (2001). "Bearer of Wisdom: A Spirituality of Mission" in *Central Newsletter*, Volume XXXI No. 2. London: St. Joseph's College.
- YWAM Nuremberg. (2023). *The Current State of Christian World Missions in 2023*. Available at: <https://www.ywamnuremberg.com/blog/the-current-state-of-christian-world-missions-in-2023> [Accessed 27 May 2025].

## Author: Dr Sulumenty Odhiambo

Head of Religious Education at a secondary school in Southwest London and Honorary Research Fellow at University College London. A close associate and friend of the Mill Hill Missionaries.