

# MISSIONAL CODE OF CONDUCT

The church has awakened to its missional identity—and its responsibility to witness without exacerbating the tensions of our world.

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The gospel was launched into a context of religious pluralism ([1 Corinthians 8:5](#)). But for much of the history of the Christian church in Europe, this was not the case. It lived isolated from the great religious traditions of Asia and Africa, cut off by the power of Islam, and separated from the religions of the Americas by the ocean. Its particular identity and distinctive form were shaped by a religiously monochrome society.

Today, things are quite different. The church has awakened to its missional identity. It is a global church which now exists in every part of the world. All major religions have experienced a resurgence in growth and vitality, and there are an escalating number of conflicts worldwide fuelled by racial, ethnic,

religious, and ideological animosities. The contrasting poles of ideological pluralism and fundamentalism are growing. Technological advances have unified the world, making us all aware of our fragile dependence on one another; the combination of technological advances, militarism, and the globalization of the Western economic worldview has brought an ecological and nuclear crisis that threatens the planet.

The sensitive observer can see the danger lurking on many fronts. And with this context as a background, a historic document was launched in late June by leaders of the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), and evangelicals (World Evangelical Alliance) on the ethics of mission and evangelism entitled "[Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct](#)" (PDF). The product of a five-year study process conducted by these three bodies, it also included input from the Orthodox and Pentecostal communions.

The document is driven by concerns that the church should witness to Jesus Christ in an authentic and ethically responsible way, so as not to exacerbate the tensions of our world. The experience of the younger churches in the global South provide some background. At least three things characterise these churches, in contrast to the West: a context of religious pluralism that is more contentious, a more

vigorous evangelistic zeal and practice, and a fast-growing church that upsets the religious status quo. These have led to tensions and accusations that the church in these parts of the world employs unethical means in its aggressive proselytisation of adherents from other faiths.

The document does not back down from the responsibility of the church to witness. It begins in the preamble: "Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian." But its primary concern is revealed in the next line: "At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings." This is the burden of the document.

Following the Preamble, the document unfolds in three parts:

- "A Basis for Christian Witness," which lays the foundation for Christian witness. It is a strong affirmation of the church's task to follow Jesus in evangelism and dialogue in the power of the Spirit in a way that is not coercive or deceptive. It also affirms the responsibility to witness in situations in which it is difficult, and even prohibited.
- "Principles," which articulates twelve ethical principles that shouldn't be surprising—imitating Christ in his love, respect, solidarity, and compassion, while rejecting violence and false

witness.

- "Recommendations" to local congregations, denominations, and mission groups to study the document; build relationships of trust and respect with adherents of other religions; strengthen their own Christian identity; and cooperate with others in issues of justice and common good, call on government to protect religious freedom, and pray for the well-being of our neighbours.

What makes this document historic is not primarily its content. Not much is new, although it is a well-worded, sensitively-written, and timely document for our global world. Rather, it is the fact that three Christian bodies that represent perhaps 90% of world Christianity have agreed on this document. A spokesperson for the World Evangelical Alliance—a network of evangelical alliances in 128 countries, representing 600 million people—comments: "It is a historic text both for its content and because this is the first time since the 16th century that the three main bodies representing nearly all of world Christianity jointly endorse one document and recommend it to their respective constituencies."

The document does not touch on the issue of the theology of religions, the kind of claims that are made for the finality of Christ, the issue of conversion, or a variety of other sticky theological issues that would have made any kind of ecumenical consensus impossible. It is a document that

restricts itself to the *ethics of witness*—a global code of conduct for witness that will not betray the gospel or cause suffering for others.

The document not only offers wisdom for life in a pluralistic world, but I was also encouraged by a number of its other aspects. First, there is a strong affirmation of Christian witness, which has certainly been hurt by less than honourable methods. Dangerous and delicate situations of religious pluralism conspire to silence Christian witness. Yet this document does not shrink back from confessing the church's participation in the mission of Christ.

Second, this statement is a remarkable display of ecumenical cooperation. It is hard to fathom 90% of Christians agreeing on anything! And our division has scandalously blunted our witness. So this is a very positive step.

Third, a thoroughly Trinitarian basis for Christian witness is evident throughout the document. As the Father sent the Son into the world in the power of the Spirit, so believers are sent to witness in word and deed to the love of the Triune God. In our witness we follow Jesus Christ, and honour the Father, in the power of the Spirit.

This is a document worth studying. However, I hope that the large theological issues this study group did not address—like

the content of the gospel, the meaning of the work of Christ, the nature of world religions, and the nature of evangelism, witness, and mission, among other things—will remain subjects of ongoing discussion.