

APPENDIX C THE CHALLENGE OF PROSELYTISM AND THE CALLING TO COMMON WITNESS

STUDY DOCUMENT OF THE JOINT WORKING GROUP
BETWEEN THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

FOREWORD

We would like to present the document *The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling to Common Witness*, which has been prepared by the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, in response to concerns expressed by some of our churches in regard to the missionary outreach of other churches that would seem to bear some of the characteristics of proselytism.

It is within the concern for full Christian unity and common Christian witness that the question of proselytism is looked at in this document. There is the common conviction that central to the work of Christian unity is an urgent need for all Christians to be able to give a truly common witness to the whole Christian faith.

In this spirit, the document may help Christian communities to reflect on their own motivation for mission and also on their methods of evangelizing. Dialogue in a truly ecumenical spirit with those considered to be proselytizing is highlighted.

It is our hope, therefore, that this document will be shared at different levels of church life and reflected on by churches, so that it can contribute towards breaking down mistrust, suspicion, misunderstanding or ignorance of the other, where any of these may exist, as well as encourage persevering effort to seek new ways and means of closer collaboration in evangelization, according to the different circumstances of time, place and culture.

All such efforts will mean a deeper commitment to the goal of full communion among Christ's disciples, in the certitude that our fellowship is with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. This document is meant as a contribution to that goal.

His Eminence Metropolitan Elias of Beirut
Most Rev. Alan C. Clark
Co-moderators of the Joint Working Group

25 September 1995

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This document is the result of discussions in the Joint Working Group (JWG) and is presented with the conviction that it is timely, and with the hope that it may serve as an impulse for further reflection and action in the churches. The conversations in the JWG were marked both by the grateful recognition of the increase of common witness of Christians from different traditions, and serious concerns about tensions and conflicts created by proselytism in nearly all parts of the world. It is the new reality of common witness and a growth in *koinonia* which forms the backdrop for a critical consideration of proselytism which has been described as conscious efforts with the intention to win members of another church.¹
2. Even though the JWG has addressed the questions of common witness and proselytism on two previous occasions, recent dramatic events have led it to study these issues once again. Over the past few years we have become more aware of the concern being expressed in new situations and contexts in which people tend to be vulnerable in one way or another, and where proselytizing activity is alleged to be taking place. Some situations invite urgent ecumenical attention, such as:
 - within the climate of newly found religious freedom, e.g. in Central and Eastern Europe where there is a threat felt by some churches that their members are under pressure from other churches to change their allegiance;
 - instances in the "developing world", (often easily identified with nations in the southern hemisphere, though also found elsewhere), in which proselytizing efforts take advantage of people's misfortunes – e.g. in situations of poverty in villages, or in the mass migration to the cities where new arrivals have a sense of being lost in anonymity, or marginalized, and are frequently outside the pastoral structure of their own church – to induce them to change their church affiliation;

- where people of a particular ethnic group, traditionally members of one church, are said to be encouraged by unfair means to become members of other churches;
 - the activity of some new missionary movements, groups or individuals, both within our churches and outside them, especially those originating in the newly industrialized nations which enter countries often uninvited by any church and begin missionary activity among the local people in competition with the local churches;
 - in various places the arrival of evangelizing groups making extensive use of the mass media and causing confusion and division among local churches;
 - in many parts of the world, the churches are experiencing proselytizing activities of sects and new religious movements.
3. The purpose of this document is to encourage all Christians to pursue their calling to render a common witness to God's saving and reconciling purpose in today's world and to help them to avoid all competition in mission that contradicts their common calling. With this aim the document seeks to facilitate a pastoral response to the continuing challenge of proselytism which not only endangers existing ecumenical relations but is also an additional barrier to our growing together in reciprocal love and trust as brothers and sisters in Christ.
 4. Today, we thank God for the achievements of ecumenical theological dialogues during recent decades and for a new climate of understanding and friendship in which ecumenical relations are being developed. We are also grateful for all the recent encouraging signs of better mutual understanding and joint perspectives in the area of common witness and proselytism.² These are recorded in bi-lateral and multi-lateral dialogues among churches and can be seen in significant initiatives of common witness at different levels of church life. These agreements and joint actions provide a basis and encouragement to intensify our efforts to bear together a credible witness to the gospel in the contemporary world.
 5. In this study process we wish to affirm what continues to be valid in the two previous WCC/RCC Joint Working Group documents: *Common Witness and Proselytism*³ and *Common Witness*.⁴ We also want to take into account relevant material on evangelism and proselytism from some of the aforementioned dialogues. In addition, this study process will be linked with another possible study on proselytism in the World Council of Churches by Unit II.⁵
 6. We acknowledge with appreciation similar studies being undertaken by ecumenical bodies like e.g. the Conference of European Churches⁶ and the Middle East Council of Churches.⁷ Our desire is to invite reflection and action on the part of churches of different traditions in a task to which all are called on our pilgrimage to a fuller expression and experience of visible Christian unity

II. MISSION AND UNITY: THE CONTEXT OF COMMON WITNESS

7. An essential element of the Church is to participate in the mission of God in Jesus Christ to the world by proclaiming through word and action God's revelation and salvation to all people (*1 Jn* 1:1-5). Indeed, God's mission towards a "reconciled humanity and a renewed creation" (cf. *Eph* 1:9-10) is the essential content and impulse for the missionary witness of the Church.
8. Mission in this sense of being sent with a message that is addressed to the spiritual and also material needs of people is thus an inescapable mandate for the Church. This imperative is affirmed today by many churches and is expressed through their regular activities as well as special efforts (New Evangelization, Decades of Evangelism, Mission 2000). Sent to a world in need of unity and greater interdependence amidst the competition and fragmentation of the human community, the Church is called to be sign and instrument of God's reconciling love.⁸
9. Ecumenical relationships, however, have from the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement been shaped by the insight that the search for the visible unity of Christ's Church must include the commitment to and the practice of a common missionary witness. In the prayer of Jesus "that they all may be one so that the world may believe" (*Jn* 17:21), we are reminded that the unity of Christians and the mission of the Church are intrinsically related. Divisions among Christians are a counter-witness to Christ and contradict their witness to reconciliation in Christ.
10. In responding to the appeal for the unity of Christians in effective missionary witness, we need to be aware of the reality of diversity rooted in theological traditions and in various geographical, historical and cultural contexts. We recognize, therefore, that the unity we seek is a unity that embraces a legitimate diversity of spiritual, disciplinary, liturgical and theological expressions that enrich common witness. It will include the discovery and appreciation of the many diverse gifts of Christ which we share already now as Christians in "real but imperfect communion", gifts given for the unbuilding of the church (cf. *Rm* 12:4-8). Even when churches are not in full communion with each other they are called to be truthful to each other and show respect for each other. Such an attitude does not subvert their self-understanding and their conviction to have received the truth but rather facilitates the common search for unity and common witness to God's love for the world.
11. In the growing ecumenical *koinonia* there must also be a way of witnessing to the gospel to each other in faithfulness to one's own tradition and convictions. Such mutual witness could enrich and challenge us to renew our thinking and life, and could do so without being polemical towards those who do not share the same tradition. "To speak the truth in love" (*Eph* 4:15) is a challenge and an experience long accepted within the ecumenical movement.

12. The recognition of an already existing, though imperfect, communion among churches is a significant result of ecumenical efforts and a new element in twentieth century church history. This existing communion should be an encouragement for further efforts to overcome the barriers that still prevent churches from reaching full communion. It should provide a basis for the renewal, common witness and service of the churches for the sake of God's saving and reconciling activity for all humanity and all creation. It should also provide a basis for avoiding all rivalry and antagonistic competition in mission because "the use of coercive or manipulative methods in evangelism distort koinonia".⁹
13. When Christians by means of efforts towards common witness struggle to overcome such lack of reciprocal love, of mutual understanding and of trust they will be open to the call for repentance and for the renewal of their efforts. This is the way "to come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (*Eph* 4:13).
14. These efforts include self-critical reflection on our relationships with other churches, openness to appreciate authentically evangelical expressions of life in them, and to be mutually enriched. They will also include engaging in a more authentic dialogue where we can speak meaningfully and honestly to one another, discussing difficulties as they arise and trying to build up relationships (cf. *Eph* 4:15).

III. SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

15. We acknowledge the right of every person "alone or in community with others and in public or in private"¹⁰ to live in accordance with the principles of religious freedom.¹¹ Religious freedom affirms the right of all persons to pursue the truth and to witness to that truth according to their conscience. It includes the freedom to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the freedom of Christians to witness to their faith in him by word and deed. Religious freedom involves the right to freely adopt or change one's religion and to "manifest it in teaching, practice, worship and observance"¹² without any coercion which would impair such freedom. We reject all violations of religious freedom and all forms of religious intolerance as well as every attempt to impose belief and practices on others or to manipulate or coerce others in the name of religion.
16. Freedom of religion touches on "one of the fundamental elements of the conception of life of the person". The promotion of religious freedom contributes also to the harmonious relations between religious communities and is therefore an essential contribution to social harmony and peace. For these reasons, international instruments and the constitutional nations recognize the right to religious freedom.¹³ proselytism can violate or manipulate the right of the individual and can exacerbate tense and delicate situations between the communities and thus destabilize societies.
17. The responsibility of fostering religious freedom and the harmonious relations between religious communities is a primary concern of the churches. Where principles of religious freedom are not being respected and lived in church relations, we need, through dialogue in mutual respect, to encourage deeper consideration and appreciation of these principles and of their practical applications for the churches.

IV. NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PROSELYTISM

18. In the history of the church, the term "proselytism" has been used as a positive term and even as an equivalent concept for missionary activity.¹⁴ More recently, especially in the context of the modern ecumenical movement it has taken on a negative connotation when applied to activities of Christians to win adherents from other Christian communities. These activities may be more obvious or more subtle. They may be for unworthy motives or by unjust means that violate the conscience of the human person; or even if proceeding with good intentions, their approach ignores the Christian reality of other churches or their particular approaches to pastoral practice.
19. Proselytism as described in this document stands in opposition to all ecumenical effort. it includes certain activities which often aim at having people change their church affiliation and which we believe must be avoided, such as the following:¹⁵
 - making unjust or uncharitable references to other churches' beliefs and practices and even ridiculing them;
 - comparing two Christian communities by emphasizing the achievements and ideals of one, and the weaknesses and practical problems of the other;
 - employing any kind of physical violence, moral compulsion and psychological pressure e.g. the use of certain advertising techniques in mass media that might bring undue pressure on readers/viewers;¹⁶
 - using political, social and economic power as a means of winning new members for one's own church;
 - extending explicit or implicit offers of education, health care or material inducements or using financial resources with the intent of making converts;¹⁷
 - manipulative attitudes and practices that exploit people's needs, weaknesses or lack of education especially in situations of distress, and fail to respect their freedom and human dignity.¹⁸
20. While our focus in this document is on relationships between Christians, it is important to seek the mutual application of these principles also in interfaith relations. Both Christians and communities of other faiths complain about unworthy and unacceptable methods of seeking converts from their respective communities. The increased cooperation and dialogue among people of different faiths could result in witness offered to one another that would

respect human freedom and dignity and be free of the negative activities described above.

V. SOURCES OF TENSION IN CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

21. We need to look at some of the sources of tension in church relationships which could lead to proselytism, in order to ground some of this concern. One is the holding of distorted views of another church's teaching or doctrine and even attacking or caricaturing them e.g. denouncing prayer for the dead as a denial of the need for personal acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior; discrediting the veneration of icons as signs of crude idolatry; interpreting the use of art in church buildings as a transgression of the first commandment.
22. Different understandings of missiology and different concepts of evangelization also underly some inter-church tensions e.g. seeing God's gift of salvation as coming exclusively through one's own church; seeing the task of mission as exclusively concerned with social matters or exclusively with spiritual matters, rather than in a holistic way. They can lead to competition or even conflict in missionary practice among the churches rather than a common approach to mission.
23. Different theological and pastoral understandings of the meaning of certain concepts can also contribute to tension in relationships. For example some aim at the re-evangelization of baptized but non-practicing members of other churches. But there are different interpretations of who is "unchurched", or a "true" Christian believer. Efforts to understand the perspectives of other Christian communities on these matters are therefore necessary.
24. The varieties of understanding of membership existing among churches can also be an unnecessary source of tension. There are theological issues involved. The way of becoming a member and even the way of terminating membership in particular churches can be understood very differently. The duties and responsibilities of members also differ from church to church. This diversity of understanding influences the way we see changes in church affiliation.
25. Unfortunately, there are occasions when the personal and cultural confusion of people, their social-political resentments, the tensions within a church, or their hurtful experiences in their own church can be played upon to persuade them to be converted.
26. Sometimes, evangelizers can be tempted to take advantage of the spiritual and material needs of people or their lack of instruction in the faith in order to make them change their church affiliation because they may interpret this as a lack of pastoral care and attention to these people on the part of churches to which they belong. But in fact, pastoral care, even if it could be more adequate, may be available to the person in his/her own church. Here again there may be different perceptions as to what is adequate and what is inadequate in the field of pastoral care. However the churches must always look for ways to improve the pastoral care they give to their people, especially the quality of instruction in the faith.
27. Tensions also arise on occasion because of the unjust interference on the part of the State in church matters in order to influence people to change church membership.
28. In other situations where a church identifies with the government or works in collusion with it to the extent that it fails to exercise its prophetic role, tensions can arise within the Christian community from what may be seen as preferential treatment by the government for that particular church.
29. Tensions can result in evangelizing activity when there is a lack of sufficient regard for people's culture and religious traditions. There can also be dangers if we lose sight of the fact that the gospel must take root in the soil of different cultures, while it cannot be limited to any culture.
30. Finally, there can be a lack of respect for the beliefs and practices of minority groups in contexts dominated by a majority church, and an inability to see them as full and equal partners in society that causes tensions in relationships. In some cases, a dominant Christian tradition has allowed restrictive laws to be framed by the State which disfavor Christians of another tradition.

VI. STEPS FORWARD

31. Despite all efforts to combat it, the problem of proselytism is still with us, causing painful tensions in church relationships and undermining the credibility of the Church's witness to God's universal love. Ultimately, proselytism is a sign of the real scandal which is division. By placing the issue of proselytism in the context of Church unity and of common witness we suggest a perspective which makes it possible to approach the problem within an adequate theological framework.
32. As responsible ecumenical relationships in many different contexts are a complex reality requiring study and theological dialogue, prayer and practical collaboration, we would like to recommend the following to the churches keeping in mind that the movement for Christian unity can also contribute to breaking down barriers between people in the wider society as well:
 - to encourage churches to pray for one another and for Christian unity in response to the prayer of our Lord, that his disciples "may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21);
 - to prepare more adequate Christian formation programs within our churches so that people are better equipped to share their own faith, as well as ecumenical programs that will foster respect for the integrity

- of other Christian churches and openness to receive from them;
- to develop a sensitivity to existing ecclesial realities in a given area so that when providing the required pastoral care for one's own church members, it can be done in an atmosphere of communication and appropriate consultation;¹⁹
- to condemn publication of unverified alleged events or incidents concerning church activities that only fan feelings of fear and prejudice, and of one-sided or prejudicial reports on religious developments which can undercut efforts towards cooperation;²⁰
- to try to understand history from the perspective of other churches in order to arrive at a shared common understanding of it and where necessary, at reconciliation, mutual forgiveness and healing of memories;
- to study together the nature of diakonia in order that the characteristics of Christian service be made clear and transparent; that is, that it may be truly inspired by the love of Christ and that it may not be a reason for tension, nor a means of proselytism;
- to help people to a greater awareness of the phenomenon of sects and new religious movements, through collaborative efforts, and also to consider the question of how to respond pastorally but firmly to coercive religious practices by persons and groups that are not in keeping with the principles of religious liberty;
- to include in any future study of proselytism the significant participation of Christians, both within and outside WCC/RCC circles of influence, especially those accused of these practices and those who have changed church affiliation through the efforts of another church.²¹

33. These efforts will be effective and successful to the extent that relationships of reciprocal trust are built between the churches.

VII. CONCLUSION

34. Knowing that our common faith in Jesus, Lord and Savior, unites us and that baptism is an effective sign of unity, we are called to live our Christian vocation in unity and to give visible witness to it.

35. Therefore, it is not enough to denounce proselytism. We need to continue to prepare ourselves for genuine common Christian witness through common prayer, common retreats, Bible courses, Bible sharing, study and action groups, religious education jointly or in collaboration, joint or coordinated pastoral and missionary activity,²² a common service (diakonia) in humanitarian matters and theological dialogue. The immensely rich Christian spiritual patrimony of contemplative prayer can be a resource for all. We acknowledge that our current divisions limit the extent to which we can engage in common witness. We recall and make our own the principle cited in the Third World Conference on Faith and Order at Lund, Sweden, 1952:

"We earnestly request our churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God. Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?... Obedience to God demands also that the churches seek unity in their mission to the world".²³

36. There is also an urgent need to continue to work collaboratively in order to transcend the lines that society draws between those at the center and those on the peripheries, between those who have an abundance of resources and those marginalized because of race, economics, gender or for other reasons. These societal divisions often provide the context for proselytism and therefore challenge our divided churches to closer collaboration that will be a common Christian witness.²⁴

37. In all of these reflections we take our inspiration from the gospel itself:

"This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends... You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last; so that the Father will give you anything you ask him in my name. My command to you is to love one another" (Jn 15,12-13, 16-17).

Note on this study document

As proselytism is a reality that obliges churches to seek a solution, and a question that continues to surface at different meetings, including the WCC Central Committee and the Assembly in Canberra, the Joint Working Group, at its meeting in Wennigsen, Germany, in March 1992, decided to work on a new study document on proselytism, as this would be a broader forum to gather some of the findings from various meetings, including the bilateral dialogues, and to make a synthesis of solutions proposed.

At subsequent JWG Executive meetings, decisions were made to base the new study document on the 1970 document: "Common Witness and Proselytism" and the 1982 document: "Common Witness". Mr Georges Lemopoulos and Sr Monica Cooney were asked to prepare an outline for the work. Consultations were held with various people both within the WCC and outside. A draft outline, prepared with the help of Fr Karl Müller, *sod*, and Prof Dr Reinhard Frieling, was then submitted to the JWG Executive meetings, and a first draft was presented to the JWG plenary meeting in Crete, June 1994.

Dr Günther Gassmann and Monsignor John Radano were then appointed as drafters. They presented an amended draft to the JWG Executive in Geneva in October 1994, after which both WCC Program Unit II and Program Unit III (CCIA) were consulted (the latter on the question of religious freedom).

A final draft was discussed at the JWG plenary in Bose, Italy, May 1995, and finalized at the Executive, Geneva, September, 1995.

This document points out the problem of proselytism, noting the different realities in a variety of contexts as it is not a problem of any two churches in a particular area. It is prepared in the conviction that while we continue to proselytize and to accuse one another of proselytism, instead of speaking the truth in love, we cannot respond to the call to common witness, nor can we live the command to love one another as God has first loved us.

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frqvgghung htx lqdwqf frqfhswwxqwbuhqfwlp hv-1#Vxp p rqqwr Z lqhwvwr Fkubw lq Wrgd| tZ rug=D Uhsruwrq wkh EdswlwUrp dq
Fdwkrdf lqhwudwlrqdoFrqyhuwdwlrqv +4<; 70<; ; ; . /sdu65 lqirup dwlrq Vhuylfh : 5 +4<<32, 431
481 Fil Frp p rq Z lqhw dgg Survhqwlwp 1
491 Fil #Vxp p rq wr Z lqhw III: rs1fW/sdu1691
4: 1 Fil #Xqlwlp =P hwkrq ri Xqlrq riwkh Sdw/dqg wkh Suhvhw Vhdufk iru IxwFrp p xqlrq1Uhsruwriwkh Mr lqWlqhwudwlrqdo
Frp p lwlrq iruwkh Wkhrarj lfdG ldrjxh ehwz hq wkh Urp dq Fdwkrdf Fkxufk dgg wkh R wkrgr { Fkxufk • Edap dgg/Mxqh 4 : 057/4<<6, /
sdu571
4; 1 Fil #Hydjj hfdfoUrp dq Fdwkrdf Gldarjxh rq P lwlrq • Vhfwlrq : l6=Xqz ruwk| Z lqhw, 1
4<1 Fil #Xqlwlp =P hwkrq ri Xqlrq III/ rs1fW/sdu551
531 Fil #XVR wkrgr { 2Urp dq Fdwkrdf Frqxodwlrq III/ rs1fW/sdu51
541 R q wkh Z d| wr IxohnNrlqrdl III/ rs1fW/ 589058 : #UhsruwriVhfwlrq IY=#Fdong wr Frp p rq Z lqhw irud Uhqhz hg Z rug /sdu
47, 1
551 #Frp p rq Z lqhw III/ rs1fW/sdu771
561 R dghuVlWR P NIQ V/hg1/Wkh Wklq Z rug Frqihuhqfh rq Idlk dgg R ughu Xqg/Dxjxw48058/4<85, /Orqgrq=VFP SuhwOwg/4<86,
491
571 Wkh wkrarj lfdodvlv iruwklv frp p rq z lqhw dgg ixuwkhuwxj jhwkrqvp d| eh irxqg lq #Frp p rq Z lqhw III/ rs1fW/sdwlp 1