Doing Mission Inclusively

By Johannes Reimer[1]

1. Introduction

In his well-written book entitled, «How to Reach Secular People» the American church planter George G. Hunter III develops criteria of effective communication to secular people. Hunter states:

> «Effective communicators do not try to do all the communicating. They know that the faith is more caught than taught´, that a person´s meaningful ´Involvement´ can do its own communicating, and that involvement helps people to discover the faith for themselves; so they get seekers involved in the fellowship, message, and service of the congregations. Many people come to believe from several months of involvement.»[2]

And Jim Harnish, who intensively practices participative evangelism, reports:

> «I grew up thinking that the sequence was accept Jesus, then read the Bible, then get into fellowship and serve in the world. But I learned that, usually, it is just the opposite; they get involved first, then they ask the biblical and theological questions, then they move into commitment.»[3]

It is widely accepted in missiological circles that mission requires involvement, contextualization and inculturation. You cannot reach people with the gospel without learning their language, rituals and rules, values and other religious and cultural settings. Only when we understand the people will we start to communicate meaningfully to them, so that they may understand what we have in mind. Mission of the church is for the people and the church is "a community for the world"[4], or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, "The church is the church only when it exists for others … The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving."[5]

But how do we find in-routes into a foreign culture? How do we become such a *church for others*, without falling into the helper syndrome of "pro-existence" as Theo Sundermeier, reflecting on Bonhoeffer's phrase and its liberal-humanist background, critically observes.[6] Too often the *church for others* knew better what the others needed and the helper soon dominated those in need of help. Sundermeier therefore suggested, instead of talking about a church f*or others,* we should speak of "the church *with* others.[7] Not pro-existence is required in mission but co-existence.[8] Similarly, Gourdet suggests that Identification with the people

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[2] Hunter 1992:99-100.
[3] Harnish in Hunter 1992:100.
[4] Barth 1962:762ff.
[5] Bonhoeffer 1971:382f. Translation in Bosch 2011:384.
[6] Sundermeier 1986:62ff. See also Bosch 2011:384.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Sundermeier 1986:65.

can only be reached through realistic participation in the life of the people, which requires that we less work for the people but rather with them.[9] Without being close to the people we will not be able to develop proper ways of missionary communication, because we will not be able to learn from and with them.[10] And learning together with those whom we seek to evangelise is a crucial precondition for any meaningful evangelism.[11] Evangelisation requires an open space in which all participants in the process are welcomed to share their part of the story without limits. Such an open space presupposes a culture of welcome.[12]

The question may however be allowed – is participative evangelism and mission theologically adequate? Is mission of a church with others, biblically speaking, an option or rather one of those neoliberal ideas of our Western democratistic culture? And if so – how do we develop an inclusive praxis of mission without compromising our exclusive faith? The question is by all means not easy to answer as the debates around the *common ground theology*[13] show. Those and similar questions will guide our discussion.

2. In the world but not of the world

We will start with some philosophical observations. Let us compare our modern Western thinking with the Hebrew thinking of the Old and the New Testament. For most of us, knowledge starts and ends with a dividing line. Such a simple line sets the parameters of past and future, now and then, us and them, thesis and antithesis. We could go on. So a divider clarifies identity and opens the discussion on differences. As Christians we have generally followed the same pattern.[14]

For many years this has been the classic approach in missiology also. John Howard Yoder's famous dictum, "Where there is no world there can be no mission"[15] stands as an example. We create the need for evangelism and mission drawing the line between us in the church and those in the world, the saved and the unsaved. And then we listen to God´s commission calling us to disciple the unsaved. As soon as we cross the barrier of the dividing line we are in mission as crossing frontiers.

You may say, this is biblical, isn´t? God himself started our life on earth with dividing water from water, light from darkness, animals from us humans (Gen. 1:1ff)? Does he not separate the chosen from the not chosen? Has he not elected Abraham and with him Israel from the rest of the nations? And in the New

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[9] Gourdet 1996:407f.
[10] Hesselgrave 1991:46.
[11] Loewen 1977:36, see also: Gourdet 1996:407; Hiebert 1985:81f.
[12] See more about the concept of participation in a culture of welcome in Reimer 2013:140ff.
[13] With the term *common ground theology (CGT)* we mark those attempts radically to contextualize the gospel into religious frames of reference which would allow the non-Christian religion to determine the outward signs and structures of faith. The adherents of CGT will refer to themselves then as Jesus Muslims or Jesus Hindus and to their meeting places as Jesus mosque or Jesus ashram. See the discussion in Reimer 2012:211-236; Tennent 2006:101-115.
[14] See in this regard Hieberts (2006:196-220) discussion of Western Images of Others and Otherness.
[15] Yoder in Reimer 2009:2007.

Testament – is there not a clear call to urge the people out of the world and separate them into the new social and cultural reality called church?[16]

Well, I would argue, Yes and No. At first glance – yes, the Bible teaches divisions. Jesus himself warned his disciples about divisions even cutting families into friends and enemies. God´s word divides the right from the wrong. But digging deeper you will soon discover a general inclusiveness of God´s dividers. It is true that God separates light from darkness - but can there be light without darkness? In fact, day and night are necessarily poles of the same reality of life. It is true God that chose some people from the midst of others but, as in the case of Abraham, he did not select him from the nations for the sake of separation, but rather as a blessing for all the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). Sure, Jesus sends his disciples to all nations of the world to make them disciples, but not to withdraw them from the world, but to transform them in the midst of the world (Matth. 28:18-20). Whatever God divides, he does so to create wholeness, to heal brokenness, to restore the original image. Paul Hiebert states: "The scripture leads us to a startling conclusion: On the surface we are males and females, blacks, browns and whites, rich and poor, old and young, but beneath this we are one humanity. Our oneness of humanity is declared in the creation account (Gen. 1:26) and affirmed by the universalism implicit in the Old Testament (Ps. 148:11-13) Is. 45:22; Micah 4,1-2). The nations are waiting for Yahwe (Is. 51:5). His glory will be revealed to all of them (Is. 4:,5). His servant is the light to the Gentiles (Is. 49:6) and they will worship in God´s temple in Jerusalem (Ps. 96,9)."[17] Sure we humans have sinned against God and one another. Sin has brought divisions and even alienation to our world (Gen. 3:12,16; Gen. 4:8,23: Gen. 11:9). But in Christ humanity will be restored into the lost oneness (Phil. 2:11; 1Cor. 15).

Yes God clearly identifies matters. He reveals sin and identifies righteousness. And he does so to set a process of restoration in motion. His dividers are never a simple line, but rather a cycle with two or even more poles interconnecting life as a whole. Such dividers do not simplify matters. Life, culture, community are never black and white, right or wrong. Life instead is colorful, multidimensional, much more complicated than some of us may even imagine. God´s image of restored life is a rainbow, and not just the opposite of darkness. With God mission is never just a bridge crossing frontiers from the right to the wrong; it is a cycle rather, a process, a growing together of poles divided, through his presence in the world. Can there be a tree in the world he has not made? No! Can there be humans, regardless how wrong they live and how bad and ungodly their lifestyle might be, that God has not made? No! God is always first! He is always present, even among those who live a rebellious life.

Let me illustrate what I mean by using the example of world religions. In the past things war very simple. We drew a clear line between Christianity, the only right religion, and the other non-Christian religions. Hendrik Kraemer, for instance, strictly declared all non-Christian religions as demonic.[18] Today we understand that such a view is oversimplified and hold with the German missiologist, Peter Beyerhaus a more comprehensive, three-polar view on religion discovering Gods presence in the other

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[16] Compare Mt. 28,18ff.

[17] Hiebert 2006:209.

[18] Kraemer 2009:101ff. Kraemers position is critically discussed against his biography and the context of his time in: Hallencreutz 1966.

faith, human creativity and, of course, demonic deception.[19] All people seek for an explanation of the unknown, long to receive answers to their questions about the transcendent and experience even the greatness of the creator. You will find traces of God in all world religions. Beyerhaus calls this the theonom principle. Others have preferably used the term general revelation.[20]

On the other hand humans have developed their own religious ideas. Coping with the unknown, they gave names to the phenomena, designed religious theories, established rites and rituals, moral values and ethical principles. Religion, Theo Sundermeier states, is always "a joint answer of people to the transcendental experience in rite and ethic".[21] And, as with all human invention, such an answer is never absolute, never totally wrong or totally right. It is contextual, preliminary, and subjective.

And thirdly, says Beyerhaus, religions are demonically influenced, deceived and corrupted. Satan will always try to mislead humans and estrange them from God. In conclusion, religions are complex realities. There can never be a simple dividing line of wrong and right to the phenomena, not to even mention the adherents. It is not wise to call God's presence among them wrong or eliminate creative human thinking but, of course, it would be complete nonsense to accept the demonic. We do well to distinguish, to be critical and at the same time open to discover the unexpected presence of the Most High in the midst of even a non-biblical religion! Mission here is a journey to and with the people, following God's presence among them in constant battle with the enemy. God's general presence in the world leads us to consider Inclusiveness as a vital category of missional praxis.

3. Change requires Inclusiveness – Insights from cultural anthropology

Let us see what this means for our mission today. We are called to go and disciple the *ethne*, nations (Math. 28:18-20). The Greek term *ethnos* stands for a socio-political space. The best translation today simply is culture – understood as "a way of life of a given people" or "design for living", as Lothar Käser suggested.[22] To disciple nations means to transform the socio-political reality of the *ethnos* according to the teachings of Jesus. To do this, we have to understand culture structurally. Herbert Kane has noted: "Understanding the culture can *spell* the difference between success and failure in introducing new ideas or methods … the missionary … should also have all the knowledge that is available about the nature of human society and culture before he begins to administer new ideas, which constitute the medicine of social change."[23] And Dennis Teague in his very inspiring book on the correlation between culture and mission underlines the importance of cultural understanding as "essential to church growth"[24]

Culture as "a Way of living" is, according to cultural anthropology, multi-dimensional.[25] Ferraro is right dividing the cultural space into four levels: (a) things

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[19] Beyerhaus 1969:100-104.
[20] See among many: Rahner
[21] Sundermeier 1999:27.
[22] Käser 1997:37.
[23] Kane 1986:64; see also Teague 1996:159.
[24] Teague 1996:166.
[25] Ferraro 1998:18; Dahl 2001:4 and others.

we have or the material culture; (b) things we do or the social culture; (c) things we think or the cognitive culture and, lastly (d) things we believe or the religious culture. We could also speak of religion, worldview, social set of values and material-achieving.
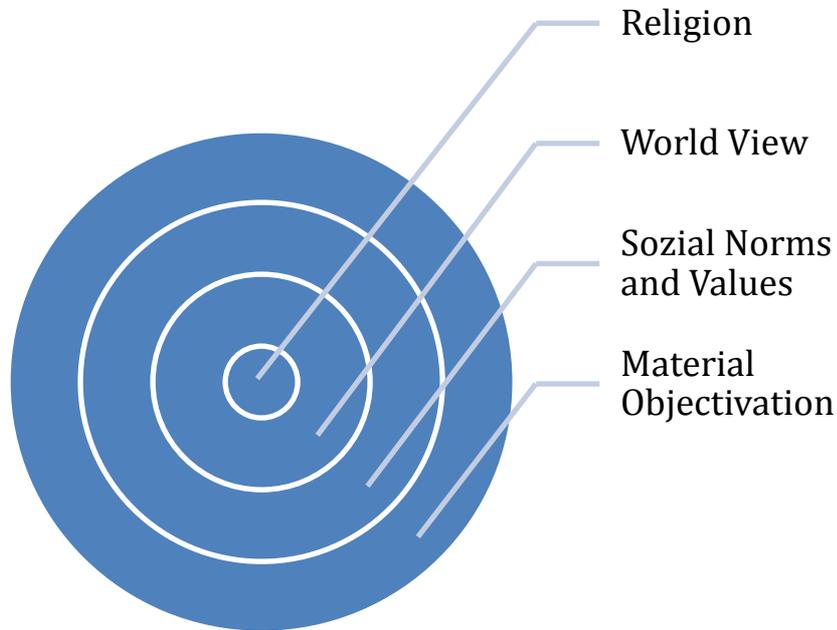

Cultural dimensions

According to anthropological research, what we believe informs our thinking, what we think informs our behaviour and what we do informs our material status. We have what we do, we do what we think and we think what we believe. In our chart the power of influence runs from the center to the periphery. This is why it is so important to change the faith of the people. Right beliefs will care for proper worldviews and determine right behaviour and physical involvement. Renewal, says the apostle Paul, requires the change of mind (Rom. 12:1-2).

But how do you get there? How do we reach the mind and the belief system of the people? Here too, insights from cultural anthropology are most helpful. Anthropological studies show that any cultural change starts from the periphery and works itself to the center. Why? Well, changes are challenges. To apply change you will have to win trust with the people. And trust does not develop through debates and discussions. It is where you work together for the common good, where you talk and discuss together about your common needs in individual and community matters - here you develop trust. And only where basic trust is established change might be possible because change will always challenge your traditional thinking and believes. Debates and battles over right or wrong, risk and potential failure are unavoidable. Most change initiatives lose their potential and dynamics right at this point.

This is not much different in the area of mission. Marvin Meyers speaks of the Question of Prior Trust (QPT) as the basic precondition for any communication of

the gospel.[26] People will not listen to us and they will obviously not agree to change their ways of living without entrusting us to guide them to the best message of the world. And again trust is not won by entering a religious debate, but by involving ourselves in community transformation, by working side by side with the people.

In other words, living and working with the people in developing a common space of living, discussing felt needs and searching together for ways of solving them creates ties of trust, a togetherness which holds strong even in times of debate, stress and questioning of traditional systems of worldview and belief.
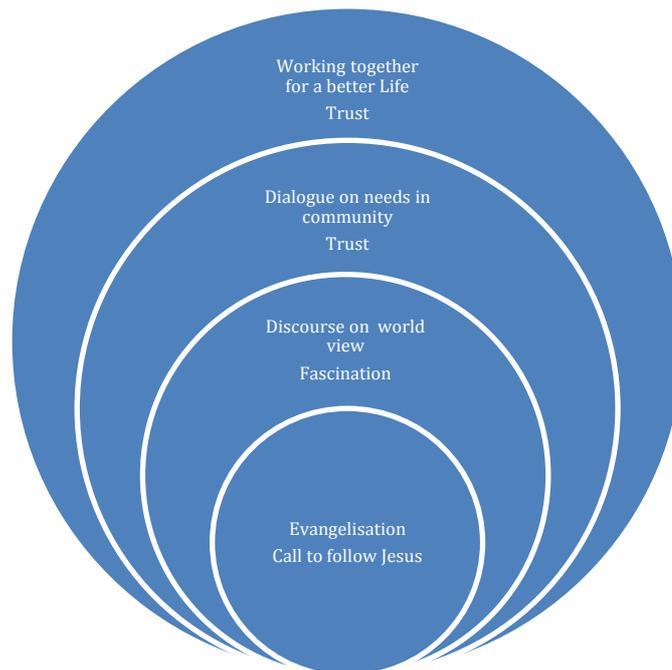
Process of spiritual transformation

4. Mission requires obedience to the call of God – Insights from theology

The theory of change as it is expressed in terms of cultural anthropology works only inclusively. This is cultural anthropology, you may say, a theory of intercultural communication. Christian mission, however, drives on biblical grounds. It is not enough to claim working with the unbelieving as a trust-building venture on the ground of what cultural anthropology teaches. Where does the Bible suggest to work together with sinners in order to free them from their bondage? Is there biblical evidence for a mission-with-others?

The answer is twofold: (a) we have to consider the lasting validity of the cultural mandate given to all humanity; (b) we orientate ourselves on Jesus, the prime source and agent of mission and evangelism.

First, we have suggested to start our mission with engaging in material and social transformation of a community with the people of the community. By using tools of community development we may establish trust with the people, which may lead to

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[26] Meyers 1981:32f.

a deeper level of mission and evangelism. The mandate for doing this together we find in Genesis 1:27, in the so-called cultural mandate.[27] Here God commissions humans to cultivate the land and rule over the earth. His commission has never been taken back. Peters states: "It is man´s responsibility to build a wholesome culture in which man can live as a true human being according to the moral order and creative purposes of God."[28] It is still valid for all the people. And the best evidence for this are the cultures and societies themselves developed by humans. Just look around you: Some Buddhist Japanese may not yet know Jesus, but they understand the validity of culture and meaningful societal structures. The most impressing cultural achievements are found in Confucian China. And the first humans conquering Space were communist Russians. Religious orientation has not prevented humans to be culturally active. The apostle Paul says, "all authorities are given by God to the best" (Rom 13:). We work together with the people for the better of life because this is clearly the will of God, and his will is expressed in his cultural mandate. All humans, regardless whether they follow Jesus or not, are subject to this mandate. It is not only possible to work together with the other on material and social issues in community development. It is our duty!

Secondly, we orientate our mission on Jesus. His life begins with a surprise. Not the spiritual leaders of Israel, but rather Gentile magicians from the East are the first to notice His divine birth. And later in ministry, He, the One who is sent to the lost sheep of this god-chosen nation, avoids to connect to the religious elite; instead He calls fishermen, tax collectors, or even a less-than-perfect woman to become his disciples. The religious elite observed his ways of engaging the community and blamed him for eating and drinking with sinners ( ). And his willingness to discover the potential of a faith community goes far beyond Israel. He praises a Roman soldier for his faith and uses a Samaritan as an example for love and care for the needy. In fact, the expression "Good Samaritan" has become a basic term for care. Jesus engages in a conversation with a prostitute woman, and the whole Samaritan city of Sichar runs out to see him. He commands his disciples to feed a crowd of 5,000 men, knowing that the only food, the five loaves of bread and two fish will be found in the basket of a little boy who did not belong to his followers and was a part of the very same crowd the disciples were commanded to feed. The disciples have had no food. None! And the little boy is not a disciple. So Jesus commanded his disciples to bring to him what the community had to offer. And we know the end of the story. They have all been fed and satisfied and there was still food left, twelve baskets full. The message of the story is clear: do not rely on what you have – rather, work with those, whom you are sent to. Some time later Peter will be asked to go to the house of Cornelius, a Roman officer. God has been working with the man in His own way and Peter is asked to lead him to Christ. Peter the Jew had to be convinced for this by a special vision of unclean animals God commanded him to eat. And the justification for the act was, whatever God has made clean is clean (Acts 10:) No question – Jesus was not avoiding working with sinners and the non-Jews. His behaviour encourages us also to do the same, because we are sent *as* he was sent by his father (John 20:21).

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[27] The term has been broadly discussed by George W. Peters (1972:166f) and recently again by Craig Ott.
[28] Peters 1972:167.

There is obviously a clear biblical justification for a church mission with the people. But there is also a clear warning. Apostle Paul warns his followers not to put their necks under a common yoke with unbelievers (2Kor 6:14-18). In verse 14 he says: "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity? Or what communion has light with darkness?" Does this mean that he prohibits any joint actions of good deed? Surely not. The passage does not refer to any social involvement, but rather to those actions compromising righteousness, falling into iniquity or lawlessness.[29] Paul warns against compromising the integrity of faith.[30] But the warning is clear: the church being in the world may not compromise her status of not being *of* the world (John 17:). She is in all weakness a "holy people" (1Pet 2:9-10), an alternative community, God's prophetic voice in the world, a sign of the kingdom of God. Being both in the world with the people and at the same time not of the world, different from the people, creates tension. And this will be, according to David Bosch, the normal condition of a missional church in the world of rebellion, injustice and disbelief.[31] So the church is invited to critically judge what to be where und what to do when.

5. Men and women of peace

As Christians we are invited to follow God in all His mission on Earth. Where He is, we shall be also! To discover him among the nations means we find the right point of departure for our own mission. And to discover those men and women he is working with will open doors for us for effective missional ministries. David Watson calls those people, men and women of peace.[32] They are God´s keys to communities. They know their own people. They see their needs and engage for the better. They sense injustice and some even offer their life fighting for justice and transformation. Surely they may not know Jesus yet, but God knows them and prepares them for a ministry of His kingdom. We do well to join hands with them in community development. We will work together for the better of life around us. We will learn to trust each other by establishing a working convivental space.

Our togetherness will not, however, downplay the ethical and spiritual differences among us; to the contrary, it will encourage us to talk them through, to debate and even fight in an ongoing discourse for the truth of the gospel. Friends and partners in social and community development will become critical dialogue partners striving for an appropriate change of mind and heart. As Christians we will always stay obedient to the missionary call of Jesus to make disciples of Him.

6. Towards a praxis of inclusive mission

Mission of a church with others is both inclusive and exclusive. Following the change pattern described to us by cultural anthropology, we will be inclusive in our involvement on the material and social levels of society and culture, we become critical and prophetic on the cognitive worldview level, and we will lovingly evangelize in spiritual and religious matters. It is understood that such comprehensive mission does not take shape overnight. It requires time, trust-

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[29] See in this regard the discussion of the narrative in Hughes 1962:244-248; Burnett 1997:344-355; Martin 1986:190-200.
[30] Hughes 1962:246; Martin 1986:197.
[31] Bosch 2011:390f.
[32] Watson 2011.

building, common understanding and an atmosphere of dialogue. Mission here is a way, a process in different stages.

First you begin with service, joining in with other social players in a given community to work for the better of that community. Secondly you engage in dialogue with those you serve and those you serve with on issues relevant to the community. Thirdly you expose yourself to questions about your faith and life and engage others in love and humility. And fourthly, do not hesitate to explain the gospel as soon as you are asked for exactly this and call people to follow Jesus if they understand and are ready to be challenged. The four phases of mission and evangelism do not always exactly follow in a linear and chronological order. It is rather a cycle which allows you to move back and forth towards the goal of God's mission in the world – to disciple the social reality of people. In this regard I speak about society-transformative evangelism and mission.[33] It requires presence, service, dialogue, discourse and proclamation.
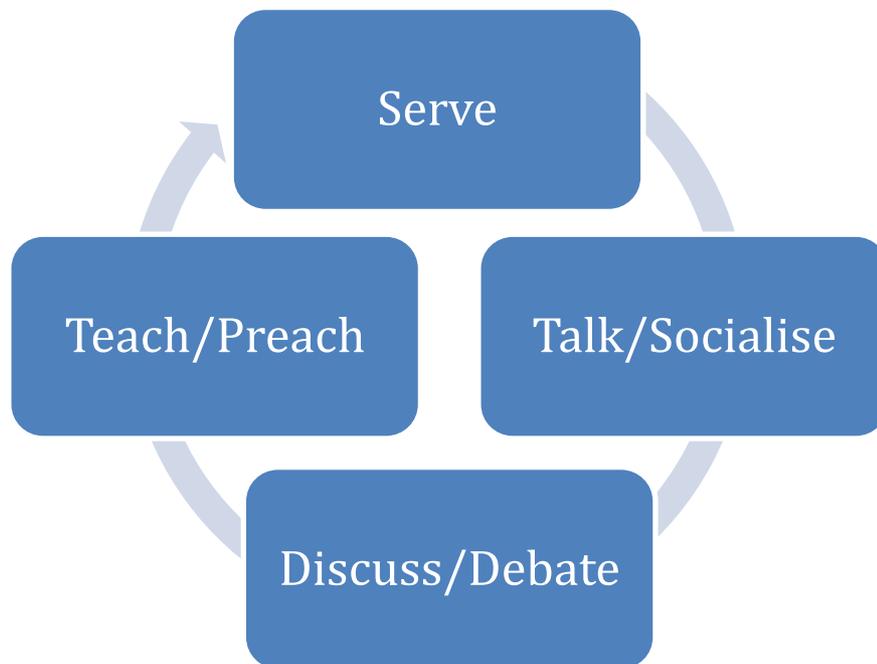
Cycle of society-transformative Mission

And on all levels of involvement Christian Mission will place itself in "between the Gospel and the world"[34], becoming what Paul Hiebert calls "mission as mediation"[35]. In fact mediation is the heard of all Christian mission, a core competency of the church involved in Gods mission to the world.[36] Serving people in joint community development projects, Christians will model to the not-yet-believers how to act as followers of Christ, feeding their imagination of what the

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[33] See more in Reimer 2013:
[34] Hiebert 2009:179
[35] Ibid.
[36] See for details Reimer 2011:19-35.

significance of the gospel for our daily life might be.[37] This way service becomes a meditative process between the person and the gospel. And than people will start asking questions, involve the servants of God in dialog and discourse on issues they find important. Again the gospel driven answer will encourage to process further until a spiritual decision becomes a natural act.

The praxis of society transformative mission, we are involved with, proves the validity of what has been said so far. There is, for instance the Christian Employment Agency we have created years ago in a small German town called Brüchermühle to help unemployed people to earn their living. Right from the start our project operated inclusively, inviting everybody in the town to join hands with us. It is amazing how successful this project has become. Men and women found employment, their family life improved and over the time many of our clients and their respected families decided to join the church and follow Jesus.[38]

Similar other projects of transformative mission have been encouraged in a number of German cities. The results are similar.[39] A comprehensive transformative approach to mission and church planting as mission with others, employing basic structures of joint community development is promising.

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[37] Booker 2003:93.
[38] The work has been studied by Martin Schulten, see Schulten
[39] See some oft he projects in: Faix 2014.

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