

Witnessing Together – Who, What and to Whom?

The Concept of Witness in *Together Towards Life* and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

Introduction

‘Witness’ has from the very beginning belonged to the vocabulary of the ecumenical movement. The first ecumenical documents issued by the WCC in the mid-twentieth century do not introduce or analyse the concept but consider it a natural part of the ecumenical discourse.¹ Through the twentieth century and moving into the twenty-first, ‘witness’ has grown in ecumenical importance and also in range of meaning; in contemporary ecumenism it is associated with several theological loci such as the Great Commission to evangelize the world, church fellowship, biblical hermeneutics as well as revelation theology. A crucial factor behind the establishment of ‘witness’ in the ecumenical discourse is the long theological history of the concept, a history that stretches back to the scriptural term *‘μαρτυρία’* (*martyría*).

Despite its obvious ecumenical significance ‘witness’ has not been systematically defined in academic research or in ecumenical dialogues and declarations.² The un-dogmatized character and multidimensionality of the concept have enabled it to act as a common starting point for different dialogue parties, but as the meaning of the concept has not been clarified in the ecumenical process, the ostensibly common language has come to conceal many different, even mutually contradictory theological views. As a result of this obscurity, the collocation ‘common witness’ that has become a slogan in contemporary ecumenism has lost a great deal of its relevance.

The unclarity regarding the meaning of ‘witness’ applies also to the newest multilateral dialogue documents issued by the World Council of Churches (WCC), *Together Towards Life. Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (hereafter CWME), 2012) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Commission on Faith and Order (hereafter F&O), 2013). Ever since the predecessor of CWME, the International Missionary Council, and F&O were born at the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, the relationship between these two movements has been characterised by struggle and competition.³ John Gibaut, director of F&O during the formation of *Together towards Life* (hereafter TTL) and *The Church* (hereafter TCTCV), sees in TTL and TCTCV a significant convergence of the

¹ For example, *The Church in the Purpose of God* (1950) uses ‘witness’ 16 times and *The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches* (1950) 9 times. Oliver S. Tomkins (Secretary to the Commission), *The Church in the Purpose of God: An Introduction to the Work of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, in Preparation for the Third World Conference on Faith and Order to Be Held at Lund, Sweden in 1952*, Faith and Order Commission Papers: No. 3, 1st edn (Chatham: Parrett & Neves, Ltd., 1950); *Toronto Statement*, Central Committee of the WCC, *The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches, Oikoumene*, accessed October 14, 2018.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/1950/toronto-statement>.

² As for theological research in general, many systematic theologians deal with the concept as part of a larger study, but the comprehensive theology of witness is not easily interpretable in these texts. One exception to the rule is James William McClendon Jr., who has dealt with the concept in his *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3: Witness*. In the twenty-first century, exegetes such as Richard Bauckham, Alexander S. Jensen, Allison A. Trites, and Laurence L. Welborn have studied the meaning of witness in the New Testament.

³ J. Gibaut, ‘From Unity and Mission to Koinonia and Missio Dei: Convergence in WCC Ecclesiology and Missiology towards Edinburgh 2010’, in *Called to Unity for the Sake of Mission*, eds. John Gibaut and Knud Jorgensen, 1st edn (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014), pp. 73–88, at p. 73.

missiological and unity-focused traditions of WCC and states that ‘Despite different goals, content, methodologies and constituencies, the twin texts bear an uncanny family resemblance to one another.’⁴ Gibaut sees the resemblance as the result of a conscious coordination and complementarity on behalf of the two commissions in the past decade.⁵ The aim of this article is to clarify the meaning of ‘witness’ in TTL and TCTCV and to evaluate to what degree the ‘family resemblance’ applies to their understanding of the concept. The analysis of witness serves as a window into understanding the whole of the respective documents.

The Semantic Field of ‘Witness’

When seeking to grasp the theological multidimensionality of ‘witness’ better it is useful to outline the semantic field of the word. TTL and TCTCV are written in English, so the standard English definition of ‘witness’ is the natural starting point for the semantic analysis. However, in TTL and TCTCV the dominant understanding of ‘witness’ originates rather from the context of New Testament (NT) Greek, which is seen most clearly in that both documents deal with the concept as a translation of ‘*martyria*’.⁶ The following overview presents the central usage of ‘witness’ in English and supplements it with the scriptural aspects of ‘*martyria*’. This is done by using *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT). At the end of this article the use of ‘witness’ in TTL and TCTCV is briefly compared with the scriptural use of the ‘*martyria*’-related terms.

The OED gives the following definitions i.a. on the noun ‘witness’ (italicizations mine): 1) *Knowledge, understanding. Obsolete*; 2) a. *Attestation of a fact, event, or statement; testimony, evidence* (given in a court of justice); b. In some versions of the Bible: testimony; 3) Testimony by signature, oath, etc.; 4) *One who gives evidence* in relation to matters of fact under inquiry; 5) *One who is or was present* and is able to testify from personal observation; 6) An evidential mark or sign, a token.⁷

As a transitive verb ‘witness’ has the following meanings i.a.: 1) a. *To bear witness to* (a fact or statement); *to testify to, attest*; b. Of a document: to furnish formally attested evidence of; c. *To be a sign or mark of*, betoken. d. To show forth evidence of; *to be a witness for*; 2) To give formal or sworn evidence of; 3) a. *To experience by personal (esp. ocular) observation*; b. Fig. Of a place, time, etc.: *to be the scene or setting of*. The intransitive form means: 1) *to bear oral or written witness; to testify*.

As a summary of the OED definition, ‘witness’ is a highly elastic concept, which can function both as a noun and a verb, and both as a transitive and intransitive verb. The noun can refer both to the subject witnessing and to the witness given by that subject. In OED, the juridical aspects of witness are prominent: a witness confirms the validity and veracity of something or gives a statement about something based on personal experience. The first meaning of the noun ‘witness’,

⁴ Gibaut, ‘From Unity and Mission’, p. 87. The previous convergence text of Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, and the previous mission statement issued by the CWME, *Mission and Evangelism: Ecumenical Affirmations*, though both published in 1982, have only little to do with each other in terms of goal, method and style, Gibaut assesses. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

⁵ Gibaut reports that in the period after the Porto Alegre assembly of the WCC in 2006, F&O and CWME staff attended one another’s meetings and invited speakers from each other’s commissions. F&O also commented on various drafts of TTL, and CWME commented on various drafts of what would become TCTCV. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶ *Together towards Life* mentions ‘*martyria*’ twice in brackets after the word ‘witness’ (par. 80 and 85), *The Church* once, (par. 65).

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. ‘Witness’.

‘knowledge’, shows the intellectual roots of the term: the content of witness is knowledge and information.

Moving on to the NT context, the first observation is that ‘*martyría*’ is not the only correspondent to ‘witness’ as defined in OED; scriptural Greek operates with four main terms, the root of which is ‘*smer*’, ‘to bear in mind’, ‘to be concerned’: ‘*mártys*’ is one who remembers and can tell about something, i.e., a witness, the verb ‘*martyreín*’ (present infinitive active of ‘*martyréō*’) means ‘to be a witness’, ‘*martyría*’ means ‘bearing witness’ or ‘the witness borne,’ and ‘*martyrion*’ means ‘witness’ as proof.’ Of these four, the Septuagint uses only ‘*martyrion*’ and ‘*mártys*’. In the NT, ‘*mártys*’ occurs 34 times, ‘*martyreín*’ 76 times, ‘*martyría*’ 37 times and ‘*martyrion*’ 20 times. Interestingly, ‘*martyreín*’ occurs 47 times in the Johannine writings, and ‘*martyría*’ 30 times, but ‘*mártys*’ and ‘*martyrion*’ not at all in the Gospel.⁸

According to TDNT, ‘*mártys*’ is a) A witness to facts; often taken into account only together with other witnesses; b) One who has lived through the facts he witnesses to and believes them; c) An eyewitness; one who participates in what he sees; Those who have seen the Risen are in a special sense his witnesses (Acts 13:31); d) A witness to the meaning of the facts: a witness *for* Jesus rather than *to* him; e) One who bears witness to the truth and dies as a result. A ‘*martyrion*’ is a) The tent of witness; b) Objective proof; c) A witness to something; equivalent to gospel, message or teaching; d) Active witness; attestation. The verb ‘*martyreín*’ is used for a) Declaring or confirming facts or events; b) Giving a good report; c) The witness of God, the Spirit or Scripture; d) Religious witness; witness to revealed truth; e) Witness to the person of Jesus (Johannine use). Closely related to ‘*martyreín*’ is ‘*symmartyreín*’, a common term meaning ‘to bear witness with’ others, and, more generally, ‘to confirm’, or, with the dative, ‘to agree’. Paul uses the term for the confirmatory witness of the conscience.⁹ Finally, ‘*martyría*’ is used for a) Religiously neutral court witness or a good report (main use outside the Johannine writings); b) Evangelistic witness to the nature and significance of Christ (Main use in the Johannine writings; refers almost without exception to the witness that is given, not the active bearing of witness); c) The witness of Jesus; identical with the word of God; d) ‘*Martyría Iēsou*’ (martyrological nuance; a formula for the gospel); e) Evangelistic confession which culminates in death.¹⁰

As a conclusion, in TDNT the semantic field of witness is broader than in OED. Witness does not only pass on information but revealed truth; it is not only about facts but about the person and significance of Jesus. The aspect of participation is central: witness is more than seeing or hearing, it is being part of and believing personally.

Witness in *Together Towards Life*

Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes consists of 112 paragraphs. The key themes of TTL are the mission of the Holy Spirit within the mission of God

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, s.vv. ‘*mártys*’, ‘*martyréō*’, ‘*martyría*’, ‘*martyrion*’.

⁹ TDNT, s.v. ‘*symmartyréō*’.

¹⁰ TDNT, s.vv. ‘*mártys*’, ‘*martyréō*’, ‘*martyría*’, ‘*martyrion*’.

(*missio Dei*), ‘fullness of life’¹¹, ‘mission from the margins’¹², and the unity of the churches in diversity.

TTL is a fruitful subject for this study since it uses the concept of witness frequently and in varying contexts. The way the concept is used in and the lack of definitions imply that the meaning of this discourse is generally established and recognized. The previously described multidimensionality of ‘witness’ and the scarcity of academic research on the subject speak, however, against this assumption.

Missio Dei in TTL

As we aim to place the theology of witness in its rightful context, we must begin with sketching the big picture of TTL. The metanarrative that the document builds on is the mission of the Holy Spirit within the mission of God, *missio Dei*.¹³

The Latin term ‘*missio Dei*’ can be translated both as the ‘mission of God’ or the ‘sending of God.’ Further, the concept can refer both to the ‘sending performed by God’ and ‘God’s being-sent’.¹⁴ The biblical understanding of *missio Dei* includes both aspects but traditional Trinitarian terminology uses the term predominantly in the passive sense.¹⁵ The contemporary version of *missio Dei*, which also characterizes TTL, first occurs in the 1950’s.¹⁶

Contemporary *missio Dei* theology consists of three constitutive affirmations: the Trinitarian nature of God as the ground and source of mission, the church’s missionary nature and the kingdom of God as the goal of mission. These affirmations have developed independently and are only superficially coordinated with each other.¹⁷ In this train of thought the classical sending of the Son and the Spirit by the Father involves another movement, the Son sending his church through the Spirit.¹⁸ The mission of the church is thus connected to God’s economic sending of the Son and the Spirit. As the economic and immanent Trinity are inseparable, participating in God’s mission means

¹¹ The purpose of God’s mission is fullness of life for the whole earth. Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, ‘Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes’, *International Review of Mission* Vol. 101 No. 2 (2012), pp. 6–42, at paragraphs 1, 102. This means above all peace, justice, liberation of the oppressed, healing and reconciliation of broken communities and the restoration of the whole creation. CWME, ‘Together towards Life’, par. 43, 102.

¹² By ‘mission from the margins’ is meant the insight that mission does not take place from the centre to the periphery or from the privileged to the marginalized, but vice versa. *Ibid.*, par. 6.

¹³ The theology of *Missio Dei* in TTL is dealt with comprehensively in the article ‘The World Council of Churches’ Mission Statement “Together Towards Life”: Mission, Evangelism and *Missio Dei*’, Ida Heikkilä, *European Journal of Theology* Vol. 27 No. 1 (2018), pp. 78-88.

¹⁴ H. H. Rosin, *Missio Dei: An Examination of the Origin, Contents and Function of the Term in Protestant Missiological Discussion* (Leiden: Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, 1972), pp. 14–15.

¹⁵ Rosin, *Missio Dei*, pp. 14-16.

¹⁶ The characteristically Trinitarian version of *missio Dei* first occurred in a preparatory document for the International Missionary Council’s conference held in Willingen in 1952. J. G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, 1st edn (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), p. 123. The term was brought into general use by Georg F. Vicedom in his book *Missio Dei* (1958). Rosin, *Missio Dei*, p. 6. For a lengthier study on the origins of the concept, see Flett’s *The Witness of God* and Rosin’s *Missio Dei*.

¹⁷ Flett, *The Witness of God*, pp. 36, 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

participating in the Trinity itself.¹⁹ However, there is considerable ambiguity about the meaning of the mentioned affirmations.²⁰ For example, proponents of *missio Dei* theology disagree on whether the missionary obligation of the church is derived from God's nature or from the redemptive purpose and acts of God.²¹

In accordance with the main tenet of *missio Dei* theology, TTL grounds the mission of the church in the Trinity: 'Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation', the document states.²² While God's love flows over to the whole creation, it is the church that truly lives in that love.²³ The church is therefore called to embody God's mission in a special way:²⁴ 'Through Christ in the Holy Spirit, God indwells the church, revealing God's purposes for the world, and empowering and enabling its members to participate in the realization of those purposes.'²⁵ It is, however, evident that mission does not involve only Christians: 'All who respond to the outpouring of the love of God are invited to join in with the Spirit in the mission of God.'²⁶ The word 'respond' does signify some kind of a positive answer to God's love, but this answer can apparently be given in other religions than Christianity, too.

Consistently, TTL acknowledges that the Spirit of God can be discerned 'wherever life in its fullness is affirmed and in all its dimensions, including liberation of the oppressed, healing and reconciliation of broken communities, and the restoration of creation.'²⁷ Christians should therefore cooperate with all those who are involved in these, regardless religion.²⁸ Thus, other religions are partners in instead of objects of mission.²⁹ TTL's strong emphasis on mission as God's own mission actually renders the beliefs of those participating in it secondary. More decisive than the distinction into Christians and non-Christians is, in fact, the distinction between the privileged and the marginalized in society, the latter being the 'main partners in God's mission'.³⁰

TTL widens the perspective further: the call into mission does not involve only men, Christian or not, but the whole creation: 'We tend to understand and practice mission as something done by humanity to others. Instead, humans can participate in communion with all of creation in celebrating the work of the Creator', TTL states.³¹ An example of creation being in mission to humanity is the healing power of the natural world. These statements make TTL the first ecumenical statement to recognize the whole creation as a partner in God's mission, not only as an object.³²

Witness as Christian Participation in Missio Dei

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 40, 41.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 161–162.

²² CWME, 'Together towards Life', par. 2.

²³ Ibid., par. 55.

²⁴ Ibid., par. 54.

²⁵ Ibid., par. 56.

²⁶ Ibid., par. 18.

²⁷ Ibid., par. 24. The same conviction is expressed in paragraphs 93 and 102.

²⁸ Ibid., par. 45, 102.

²⁹ Ibid., par. 93. See also paragraph 110.

³⁰ Ibid., par. 6, 107.

³¹ Ibid., par. 22.

³² P. Cruchley-Jones, "[Un]settled upon and Sent": Mission in the Spirit – A Biblical Reflection on Together Towards Life', *International Review of Mission* Vol. 103 No. 1 (2014), p. 64.

When TTL refers to the role of the church within the mission of God it uses mainly the term ‘participation’.³³ The term signifies that the church does not own the mission but only joins in it. The church has a unique way of participating in God’s mission: witness. In TTL ‘witness’ is used 34 times, and in all cases the term is in some way linked with the church. The combination ‘Christian witness’ occurs no less than 12 times. Thus, even though the mission of God involves the whole creation, witness is clearly restricted to Christians. This is peculiar, as witness is linked with working for societal justice, freedom and peace and more generally with the values of God’s kingdom; as these values are shared by a much wider group than the Christian community, this could easily be considered the proper arena for the whole creation’s participation.

For Christians, the fundament of the commission to witness lies in Christ’s sending of his disciples: ‘After his resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared to his community and sent his disciples in mission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21-22)’.³⁴ As an essential part of this sending, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the church.³⁵ By the Holy Spirit, the disciples ‘were formed into a new community of witness to the hope in Christ’.³⁶ These formulations leave open the question of how contemporary Christians become part of the historical sending of Christ. The answer lies in the phrase ‘By the Holy Spirit’: as contemporary Christians cannot have been sent by the historical Jesus, the Spirit must involve them and all generations succeeding the first disciples in the community of witness. Christ’s sending of his church is thus a unique, historical starting point, whereas the present actor who makes Christians witnesses is the Spirit.

God does not only send his church to witness but also empowers it to do so.³⁷ Nonetheless, witnessing is exclusively human action in the world, the human side to God’s mission. In the Scriptures, in contrast to TTL, witness is characteristic of the economic relations of the Trinity also, as John G. Flett points out: ‘Witness is the nature of the Son’s relationship with the Father (John 14:19), the Father’s relationship to the Son (John 5:32), the Spirit’s relationship to the Son (John 15:26), the Son’s relationship to his disciples (Rev. 7:9-10)’.³⁸ A way for the ecumenical movement to clarify its understanding of Christian witness could be to study the Trinitarian origins of the concept and to reflect on whether witness, in a manner like mission, can be understood as participation in the inner-Trinitarian life of God.

Witness Pointing to the Divine

As was noted above, TTL emphasizes that the Spirit is acting in the whole created world. While the Spirit has already gone before the disciples, it is not their task ‘to bring God along but to witness to the God who is already there’.³⁹ This statement implies that witness is not so much about proclaiming something new but rather about connecting with and pointing to what the Triune God has already mediated about himself. Accordingly, witness does not change the being of the receiver or make them part of some new reality; rather, the result of witness is a cognitive change that makes the object understand the work of God in the world. This deduction is in line with the fact that TTL does not see any ontic difference between the world and the kingdom of God, thus neither a need

³³ Participation in God’s mission is spoken of in the following paragraphs i.a.: 4, 21, 45, 78; ‘Participation in God’s ongoing work’ is mentioned in paragraph 43. The term ‘continuation’ is also used, but only twice, in paragraphs 50 and 111.

³⁴ CWME, ‘Together towards Life’, par. 14.

³⁵ Ibid., par. 57.

³⁶ Ibid., par. 14.

³⁷ Ibid., par. 1.

³⁸ Flett, *The Witness of God*, pp. 224–225.

³⁹ CWME, ‘Together towards Life’, par. 110; similar emphasis found in par. 94.

for men to be saved into the kingdom of God. The kingdom is not opposite to the world but continuous with it.⁴⁰

The pointing aspect of witness goes well together with the discourse of participation: witness, in like manner with participation, does not claim to own or hold the reality it witnesses to but expresses a reverent distance to it.⁴¹ In TTL witness does not only point away from itself but also to another time; although the term occasionally refers to things that are already fulfilled, such as ‘what God has done in Jesus Christ’ or ‘God’s revelation in Jesus Christ’⁴², its main focus lies on things that will be finally fulfilled only in the *eschaton*, such as ‘the vision of abundant life for all in the new heaven and earth’, ‘the coming reign of God’, ‘a movement towards life’, ‘hope in Christ’ and ‘God’s transforming grace’.⁴³

The previous analysis has shown the referring character of witness in TTL; the concept points to something that is not fully here but somewhere else. Another term that is used in the same manner is ‘sign’: for example, TTL describes the kingdom of God as an eventually eschatological reality, of which there are signs on earth: inclusion, love and wholeness.⁴⁴ The synonymy of ‘witness’ and ‘sign’, which OED refers to, thus also applies to TTL.

Mission Includes Witness, Witness Includes Evangelism

Thus far we have concluded that TTL regards mission as an all-embracing hypernym that includes the characteristically Christian witness. Next, we will ask how evangelism relates to the whole.

The basic observation when trying to perceive the role of evangelism in TTL is that evangelism is a mode of witness: ‘Witness (*martyria*) takes concrete form in evangelism – the communication of the whole gospel to the whole of humanity in the whole world.’⁴⁵ Like witness, evangelism is clearly a function of the church. However, the object of evangelism is not as evident as its subject: on the one hand TTL states that evangelism entails ‘sharing one’s faith and conviction with other people and inviting them to discipleship, whether or not they adhere to other religious traditions’, and, on the other hand, that the goal of evangelism is the sharing of the good news ‘with all who have not yet heard it’, which refers only to non-Christians.⁴⁶ In either case, in its directedness towards humanity evangelism is more restricted than mission, which is directed towards the whole creation.

TTL itself does not claim to have a clear definition of what evangelism is but acknowledges that to some churches it means leading people to a personal conversion through Jesus Christ, to others solidarity with the oppressed and witnessing beside them and to still others taking part in God’s

⁴⁰ Ibid., par. 36. The continuum is described with terms such as ‘transformation’ (par. 3 and 10) and ‘renewal’ (par. 1, 103, and 105).

⁴¹ This kind of a characterization appears reductive to Tormod Engelsen, who holds on to the sacramental or instrumental function of the church in preaching the saving gospel to humans. Tormod Engelsen: ‘*Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology*’, *International Review of Mission* Vol. 92 No. 367 (2003), pp. 481–497, at pp. 485–486.

⁴² Ibid., par. 78, 86.

⁴³ Ibid., par. 1, 2, 34, 14, 78.

⁴⁴ CWME, ‘Together towards Life’, par. 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid., par. 83.

⁴⁶ Ibid., par. 83, 80. Citing *The Cape Town Commitment* (2010) of the evangelical Lausanne Movement, TTL also states that ‘Evangelism is the outflow of hearts that are filled with the love of God for those who do not yet know him.’ (Italicization mine) Ibid., 81.

mission.⁴⁷ In practice, the two latter interpretations dominate in TTL.⁴⁸ All in all, TTL uses the concepts of evangelism and witness largely synonymously, but ‘evangelism’ is somewhat more frequently combined with the humble but outright proclamation of God’s saving acts in history and the invitation into the Christian community, whereas ‘witness’ is used when speaking of the church’s participation in the ongoing work of God in transforming the world into his eschatological kingdom.⁴⁹ Thus, evangelism draws on things already accomplished, whereas witness points to future things.

TTL does not explicate what it means that ‘witness takes concrete form in evangelism’.⁵⁰ The expression does apparently not mean that witness would be more abstract than evangelism or that only evangelism would have a visible, material dimension, since the document formulates that witness is besides words also deeds⁵¹, presence⁵², and concrete action⁵³ that can lead even to losing one’s life.⁵⁴ The document also mentions the ‘public’⁵⁵ and ‘visible’⁵⁶ dimensions of witness. Presumably, the concrete character of evangelism comes from its being outright and open proclamation; witness is a more multifaceted, occasionally also subtler form of mission.

The previous observations have shown clearly the ecumenical ‘usefulness’ of the term ‘witness’: through its inclusion of evangelism, the discourse of witness manages to encompass the outright proclamation of the Gospel and a more societally orientated witness to the values of the kingdom of God, two missiological approaches which have often been conflicting in the history of the ecumenical movement. These two emphasises are held together in the following citation: ‘The participation in “the mission of love” results in Christian witness which unceasingly proclaims the salvific power of God through Jesus Christ and constantly affirms God’s dynamic involvement, through the Holy Spirit, in the whole created world.’⁵⁷ However, as the discourse of witness manages to take a step back from the described tensions, it leaves them unsettled.

A Common Witness

⁴⁷ Ibid., par. 85.

⁴⁸ Conversion as part of evangelism is mentioned in a positive tone in paragraphs 81, 84, 85, and 88.

⁴⁹ Evangelism is understood as proclamation in paragraphs 8, 80, 81, 84, 86 and 109. In paragraph 89 ‘testimony’ is used in a synonymous manner with evangelism: ‘In situations where the public testimony to one’s faith is not possible without risking one’s life, simply living the gospel may be a powerful alternative.’ In paragraphs 100 and 92 witness is understood as societal transformation: ‘Jesus calls us [...] to go “to the ends of the earth” as witnesses in each context of time and space to God’s justice, freedom and peace.’; ‘Just as the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church under Roman persecution, today the pursuit of justice and righteousness makes a powerful witness to Christ.’ The same emphasis is found in paragraph 77. In paragraph 47, the verb ‘testify’ is used in a synonymous manner as witness: ‘To the extent that it [the church] renounces violence in its physical, psychological and spiritual manifestations both in personal interactions and in the economic, political, social systems, it testifies to the reign of God at work in the world.’

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., par. 46, 103.

⁵² Ibid., par. 89.

⁵³ Ibid., par. 47.

⁵⁴ Ibid., par. 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid., par. 89.

⁵⁶ Ibid., par. 59, 86.

⁵⁷ Ibid., par. 18.

Witness has a central role also in TTL's understanding of unity. The combination 'common witness' occurs 6 times in the document. The collocation expresses the conviction that 'the whole church should witness to the whole gospel in the whole world'.⁵⁸ In general, the communal aspect of witness is very strong in TTL, whereas the witness of individuals receives only minor attention. Witnessing together is important especially because it makes God's message of love credible.⁵⁹ Even though the unity of the churches is essential, it is not an end in itself but an instrument in God's larger mission: the unity of the whole creation.⁶⁰

The unity that TTL strives for is not one of uniformity but a 'unity in diversity'.⁶¹ As the global Christianity is diverse, also the ways of witnessing and the interpretations of this witness are different in the churches, TTL concedes.⁶² Already now the churches can bear common witness 'especially through joint efforts, by manifesting whatever divine gifts of truth and life they already share and experience in common.'⁶³

TTL does not offer any concrete norm for the witness of the church, such as the Scriptures or tradition.⁶⁴ On the contrary, in some cases it is witness that determines how the Scriptures should be interpreted: the prerequisite for witnessing to justice is said to be a contextual interpretation of the Bible (par. 74), which suggests that justice can be realized only when the Bible is consciously interpreted in accordance with goals that enhance life. As a result, 'fullness of life', remains the only criterion for authentic witness.⁶⁵ For the common witness this means that the 'call to do justice may sometimes involve breaking false unities that silence and oppress. Genuine unity always entails inclusivity and respect for others', the document affirms.⁶⁶ This confirms what was said above: in TTL the participation in God's transforming mission is an even more central goal than the unity of the churches.

Witness in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

The Church. Towards a Common Vision is a convergence text that expresses the converged doctrinal positions of the dialogue churches, in this case in the field of ecclesiology.⁶⁷ The ecclesiological phase in the work of F&O began in 1993. Along the process, F&O published two interphase documents: *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998) and *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (2005).⁶⁸

TCTCV consists of four main chapters. In chapter 1 the life and the mission of the Church are theologically based in the nature of the Triune God; in chapter 2 the nature of the church as a communion is then described from this point of view; in chapter 3 the means to communion i.e.

⁵⁸ Ibid., par. 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid., par. 61, 68.

⁶⁰ Ibid., par. 20, 61.

⁶¹ Ibid., par. 66.

⁶² Ibid., par. 63, 90, 111.

⁶³ Ibid., par. 63.

⁶⁴ Witnessing to 'God's revelation in Jesus Christ' (par. 86) does refer to God's special revelation and thus to a clearly Christian content. However, since the source of this revelation is not defined here or elsewhere – except for as the assumingly historic person of Jesus Christ, which cannot be reached anymore – and since in other contexts the document emphasizes the limitlessness of God's grace (par. 80), the expression eventually remains as vague as the others.

⁶⁵ Ibid., par. 102.

⁶⁶ Ibid., par. 69.

⁶⁷ World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214, 1st edn (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013), Introduction, p. 1.

⁶⁸ WCC, *The Church*, Historical Note, pp. 43, 44.

faith, the sacraments and the ministry of oversight (*episkopé*) are described; and finally, in chapter 4 the mission of the church in the world is discussed.

The Church uses ‘witness’ and its derivative nouns and verbs somewhat less frequently than TTL.⁶⁹ The concept plays, nonetheless, a significant role in the theological whole of the document, as will be seen in the following. The analysis of the meaning of ‘witness’ in TCTCV focuses on themes that have not yet been discussed in connection with TTL.

Communion as the Framework of Witness

The common thread running through the four chapters of TCTCV is communion (in Greek *koinonia*). According to the document, communion means participation, fellowship and sharing.⁷⁰ It is above all something that characterizes God’s own Trinitarian being.⁷¹ Originally communion involved also creation, humanity being only one part of it.⁷² It was ‘human sin and disobedience’ that thwarted this relationship.⁷³ God’s mission is to bring back the whole of creation into the divine communion.⁷⁴

The mission of God, *missio Dei*, is carried out through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁷⁵ The church, being ‘a communion in the Triune God and, at the same time, a communion whose members partake together in the life and mission of God’ (par. 23), is in turn sent by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ These formulations are clearly part of the aspiration to bridge the gap between the ecclesiological and missiological ecumenical movements, which was described in the introduction. TCTCV does succeed in narrowing the gap but still stands in continuation with its own ecumenical tradition: it lays the main emphasis on the church’s participation in the being of the Trinity and on the church’s inner communion as a reflection of God’s own life,⁷⁷ whereas TTL sees the mission of the church primarily as participation in the sending acts of God, as was seen above. Accordingly, TCTCV claims that communion is the goal of mission, whereas TTL sees communion or unity as an instrument in God’s larger mission.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ TCTCV uses the concept 32 times per roughly 16.100 words and TTL 34 times per roughly 11.900 words. As comparison, the terms ‘evangelism’, ‘evangelization’ and ‘evangelistic’ are used 8 times in TCTCV and 51 times in TTL.

⁷⁰ Ibid., par. 13.

⁷¹ The source of communion is ‘the very life of the Holy Trinity’, Ibid., par. 1. A similar formulation is found in par. 23. In par. 68 it is stated that ‘The final destiny of the Church is to be caught up in the *koinonia*/communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, to be part of the new creation, praising and rejoicing in God forever’.

⁷² Ibid., par. 1, 25.

⁷³ Ibid., par. 1. The scriptural passages referred to in this context point both to the Fall and to the ongoing sinning of humanity.

⁷⁴ Ibid., par. 1, 25.

⁷⁵ Ibid., par. 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid., par. 1, 59. The nature of the church’s communion ‘in the Triune God’ and of the Trinitarian communion itself are not further discussed in the text, which makes it open for many different readings.

⁷⁷ Paragraph 25 states that the Church is ‘a reflection of the communion of the Triune God’. ‘As an exception, in paragraph 3 TCTCV bases the mission of the church explicitly in the saving acts of God. John Gibaut sees TCTCV’s adopting of the *missio Dei* paradigm as a result from the interchange with WCC’s missiological faction, although he admits that their use of the concept is not quite the same. Gibaut, ‘From Unity and Mission’, p. 87.

⁷⁸ WCC, *The Church*, par. 25; WCME, ‘Together towards Life’, par. 29, 55. In TTL, church unity is the prevailing aspect of communion. TTL acknowledges that ‘Practically, as well as theologically, mission and unity belong together’ (par. 60). In par. 10 and 61 it refers to unity as a prerequisite for

Among men, the divine communion 'is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission)'.⁷⁹ This kind of a 'full communion within a visibly united church' is the goal of the ecumenical movement.⁸⁰ Interestingly, a big part of TCTCV understands communion rather in the same way as TTL: as a transformation of the whole creation into God's kingdom, a kingdom of peace, social justice and human dignity.⁸¹ The communion discourse thus unfolds on two levels, one concerning the church and the other the whole creation.

TCTCV's strong emphasis on communion affects the role of the church's witness. It has been argued that this kind of a communion model does not see God's economy of reconciliation as ontologically substantive for God's life in itself: as God's immanent life is his most basic existence, the movement in the economy becomes secondary to his being. Accordingly, 'The *koinonia* basic to the being of the church is defined in terms of a repose for which the second movement into the world is "not unrelated", but does not of itself define the nature of that fellowship.' This results in a focus on the inner life of the church. As for witness, as God's self-revelation is a kind of overflow of his prior internal life, the witness of the church also becomes an overflow of its *koinonia*, its internal practices and worship.⁸²

Is this critique legitimate when it comes to TCTCV? It must be admitted that the characterization finds many points of contact with the analysis above. Especially when seen in comparison with TTL, the document does concentrate more on the inner life of the church than on the church's outstretching dimension. At the same time, especially chapter 4, 'The Church: In and for the World', shows that the role of the church in the world is by no means unimportant to TCTCV. The church's vocation in the world, the proclamation of the kingdom of God, is fulfilled not only through the church's internal life but also through 'planning for mission and evangelism, through a daily life-style of solidarity with the poor, through advocacy even to confrontation with the powers that oppress human beings'.⁸³ Considering the whole of the document, the latter dimension is still clearly secondary to the church's inner communion. To summarize, in TCTCV the primary task of the church is not to witness but to live in communion with God and only thereby, as a second step, to proclaim God's kingdom.

The Baptism and the Eucharist as the Foundation for Witness

In TCTCV the sacraments are essential from the point of view of witness. According to the document, 'the confession of faith and baptism are inseparable from a life of service and witness'.⁸⁴ This means supposedly both that witness is a fruit of (confessing) the faith and, on the other hand, that faith cannot exist without witness. TCTCV's combining of witness with the sacraments is consistent with TTL's tendency to see witness as something characteristically Christian.

For the witness of the church, even more important than baptism is the Eucharist, which 'brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses'.⁸⁵ Here attention is drawn to two questions: what is an effective

mission. A similar affirmation can also be found in TCTCV, which states that 'The Church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission' (Introduction, p. 2). This affirmation is a deviation from TCTCV's big picture.

⁷⁹ WCC, *The Church*, par. 67.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 37.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, par. 64, 65. See also Historical Note, p. 44.

⁸² Flett, *The Witness of God*, p. 206.

⁸³ WCC, *The Church*, par. 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 43.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, par. 43. The citation is from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, par. 24 and 26.

witness and how does the theology of witness relate to that of the image of Christ? The latter question is difficult to answer, as the expression ‘image of Christ’ is not used elsewhere in the document. In any case, the citation implies that Christians are effective witnesses of Christ *because* they are his image; their success as witnesses depends on to what degree they resemble him. In this context witnessing can be interpreted as a kind of mirroring of Christ; it has no other content than his person, words and deeds. As for the contemporary Christians’ incorporation into the witnessing community, the sacramental dimension together with the aspect of being the image of Christ make more tangible grounds than the quite abstract involving action of the Spirit in TTL.

The meaning of ‘effective witness’ is similarly difficult to perceive. The notion becomes somewhat clearer when seen as part of TCTCV’s theology on the Christian rites that by some churches are called ‘sacraments’ and by others ‘ordinances’. In this context TCTCV makes two distinctions: firstly, ‘these events are both instrumental (in that God uses them to bring about a new reality), and expressive (of an already-existing reality)’, and, secondly, ‘They are visible, effective actions instituted by Christ and, at the same time, are made effective by the action of the Holy Spirit...’.⁸⁶ The latter distinction, that the sacraments or ordinances both *are* effective and *are made* effective, could well elucidate also TCTCV’s use of witness: a Christian witness is effective both through the authority of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Further, drawing on the former distinction, a witness is both instrumental and expressive, a characterization which is coherent with the big picture of the document. Here TCTCV differs from TTL, which sees witness as primarily expressive; as already cited above, TTL proclaims twice that the task of the disciples is not ‘to bring God along but to witness to the God who is already there’.⁸⁷

The Office of the Church as the Leader of Witness

Like TTL, *The Church* sees the foundation for the church’s commission to witness in Jesus’ sending of his disciples after his resurrection and in the outpouring of the Spirit.⁸⁸ Both documents are clear on that witnessing involves the whole church; TCTCV even calls the church ‘a community of witness’.⁸⁹

In TCTCV, however, it is the special responsibility of those who are in the ministry of oversight (*episkopé*) to ‘lead in witnessing to the Gospel’. Citing BEM, TCTCV proposes that ‘the presence of Christ among his people can most effectively be pointed to by the person ordained to proclaim the Gospel and to call the community to serve the Lord in unity of life and witness.’⁹⁰ The latter citation suggests that ordained persons are best qualified as witnesses or ‘pointers to Christ’s presence’ because of their ordained status and the tasks that are included in the office, not because of any qualitative superiority. Here the verb ‘point to’, which is not listed by OED, is used in a synonymous manner with ‘witness’.

It remains uncertain, whether ministry has a regulative and critical function in relation to the witnesses of lay people, or if its task is just to be an inspirational example. In any case, TCTCV emphasizes that all authority in the church, thus also the authority of the *episkopé* in leading the witness of the church, ‘must be understood as humble service, nourishing and building up the koinonia of the Church in faith, life and witness.’⁹¹

The Witness of the Scriptures

⁸⁶ Ibid., par. 44.

⁸⁷ WCME, ‘Together towards Life’, par. 94, 110.

⁸⁸ WCC, *The Church*, par. 2, 3.

⁸⁹ Ibid., par. 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid., par. 52.

⁹¹ Ibid., par. 49.

In *The Church* the theme of witness is not only linked with questions of missiology and ecclesiology but also with revelation theology. Only in this last context the meaning of witness in TCTCV becomes perceivable.

In its search for ‘greater agreement on the Church’ TCTCV wants to ‘draw upon the richness of the biblical witness, along with insights from the Tradition’.⁹² As Scripture is – in a way or another – normative for all Christians, ‘the biblical witness provides an irreplaceable source’ in this task, the document states.⁹³ The nature of this biblical witness is clarified in the following.

According to TCTCV, ‘Faith is evoked by the Word of God, inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit, attested in Scripture and transmitted through the living tradition of the Church. It is confessed in worship, life, service and mission.’⁹⁴ When seen together with the previous citation, the collocation ‘biblical witness’ gets the meaning of ‘attestation of the faith’. The OED gives the transitive verb ‘attest’ the following meanings i.a.: ‘To bear witness to, affirm the truth or genuineness of; to testify, certify’.¹ Based on the synonymity of the concepts, the biblical witness can be understood as an affirmation of the truth or genuineness of something, in this case faith. As regards the previous citation, it is important to note that faith is not attested *by* Scripture in its entirety but *in* Scripture.

The ‘faith’ that is attested in Scripture is, as TCTCV itself clarifies, ‘the faith “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude v. 3)’.⁹⁵ This supposedly refers to faith in the meaning of *fides quae* i.e. the faith that is believed or the content of the Christian faith. According to this reading, the Scriptures contain a witness or witnesses to the Gospel, to the revelation of God, or to whatever is considered as the content of faith. The cited passage can, however, also be interpreted to refer to the faith that believes or faith as a medium i.e. *fides qua*. According to this second reading, the Scriptures contain a witness to the personal faith that has been created in the writers and characters of the Scriptures. The use of ‘attest’ and ‘witness’ in connection with the Scriptures indicates that TCTCV sees the Scriptures as something that points to something else than itself: they are not the word or revelation of God in themselves, but they affirm and point to the truth of these.

The faith – be it *fides quae* or *fides qua* – that is attested in the Scriptures is further transmitted through the tradition of the church, TCTCV continues:⁹⁶ ‘The same Holy Spirit who guided the earliest communities in producing the inspired biblical text continues, from generation to generation, to guide later followers of Jesus as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel. This is what is understood by the “living Tradition” of the Church.’⁹⁷ TCTCV points out that the church should interpret faith contextually but still ‘in continuity with the original witness and with its faithful explication throughout the ages’.⁹⁸ The new witnesses – as a kind of interpretation of the faith – must thus be loyal to the original witness. The document does not explicate whether the original witness it speaks about is the witness of the Scriptures or an older witness preceding it, e.g. the

⁹² Ibid., par. 11, 12. Citing the F&O document *Scripture, Tradition and Traditions* (1963), TCTCV makes a distinction between tradition with a small capital letter and Tradition with a big capital letter, the former referring to the traditionary process and the latter to the Gospel itself, ‘Christ himself present in the life of the Church’.

⁹³ Ibid., par. 11. ‘Witness’ is combined with the Scriptures also in paragraph 21: ‘...as witnessed to throughout the entire New Testament’. Along with ‘witness’, TCTCV uses the noun ‘testimony’ when it refers to the Scriptures: ‘the testimony of the Scriptures’ is used in paragraph 3 and the expression ‘The New Testament Canon [...] testifies’ in paragraph 12.

⁹⁴ Ibid., par. 38.

⁹⁵ WCC, *The Church*, par. 38.

⁹⁶ Ibid., par. 38.

⁹⁷ Ibid., par. 11.

⁹⁸ Ibid., par. 38.

proclamation of the first disciples. In any case, the original witness is apostolic: TCTCV underlines that the church must be ever faithful to its apostolic origins and warns that ‘infidelity in worship, witness or service contradicts the Church’s apostolicity.’⁹⁹ The apostolicity of the original witness goes hand in hand with the leading role of the contemporary ‘*episkopé*’ in witnessing, which was noted above: the contemporary ‘*episkopé*’ stands in the apostolic succession of witness. The nature of the required ‘continuity with the original witness’ remains ambiguous: must the new witnesses repeat the original witness exactly or can they complement it? As it is not clear which particular form of witness the church should stand in continuance with, the only norm for witness becomes the previously mentioned faithfulness to the Gospel (par. 11), a position that comes very close to that of TTL.

The relationship between the original, apostolic witness and the later witnesses of the church is the one central question that is left unanswered in TCTCV. The apostles witnessed to a Christ they had met personally, but how have contemporary witnesses ‘encountered’ the Christ they witness to? If the medium of encounter is the biblical witness or, perhaps, the ‘living Tradition’, contemporary Christians witness based on a previous witness, i.e., they are secondary witnesses or transmitters of apostolic ‘witness tradition’. For the effective nature of witness, which was referred to earlier, this means that witness is effective only through the original witness it explicates. Within the preconditions of TCTCV, only the Holy Spirit can make contemporary Christians primary witnesses by ‘showing’ the Risen to them in faith.

Conclusions

This study on the meaning of ‘witness’ in TTL and TCTCV has shown that the documents use the concept in various ways and contexts but not in a systematic or coherent way. This signals that neither document aims at presenting an overarching theology of witness but uses the concept to serve a larger endeavour. A basic usage of witness is, nonetheless, discernible in both documents. This section summarizes this usage, compares it with the semantic field of witness in TDNT and points at the theological emphasises that the use of witness reflects.

The use of ‘witness’ in TTL and TCTCV is in many respects similar. Both TTL and TCTCV take *missio Dei* as the starting point for witness. In both documents witness is characteristically Christian. While the subject of witness is clear, there is considerable variation in the understanding of the content and object of witness: at times witness is outright proclamation of the Gospel, at times solidarity with the oppressed; at times it is directed to all, at times only to those who have not heard it yet. Further, both documents stress ‘common witness’, clearly emphasizing the communal aspect over the individual. Indeed, the emphasis on common witness as an act of unity is so strong that the receiving of the witness becomes secondary. Moreover, ‘witness’ is used in both texts to embrace action, presence and words.

There are significant differences in the use of witness also, which reflect the larger divergences of the texts. Within *missio Dei*, TCTCV emphasises the church’s participation in the being of the Trinity and the church’s inner communion whereas TTL stresses the church’s participation in the sending acts of God and his mission to transform the world. As both documents see witness as an instrument in the mission of God, they end up understanding also the focus of witness accordingly. One of the clearest differences between the documents is that the sacramental foundation of witness in TCTCV is absent in TTL. Another significant difference is that TCTCV sees the ministry as leader of witness, whereas TTL does not recognise such a hierarchy. In a related manner, TCTCV understands the ‘original witness’ as the norm for new witnesses, whereas TTL does not lay such an apostolic foundation. These differences in the loci of the sacraments and the ministry can be seen

⁹⁹ Ibid., par. 22.

throughout the documents. As a conclusion, where TTL and TCTCV differ the most in their understanding of witness is regarding its focus and foundation.

Finally, how does the described use of witness in TTL and TCTCV correspond with the semantic field of witness in the NT? Firstly, as we have concluded, both documents emphasize the collective aspect of witness. In NT Greek witness is, by contrast, primarily individual, since the cognizance and experience which enable witness are personal. The term *'symmartyrein'*, 'to bear witness with', is not about witnessing together in the sense of 'common witness' but about witnessing separately but congruently. Thus, some other collocation could be better fitted for speaking out together.

Secondly, in TTL and TCTCV contemporary Christians are not witnesses because they have seen or experienced personally but because they are part of the witnessing community. In the NT, a *'mártys'* is especially one who has seen the Risen and affirms the historical facts concerning his life, but also one who witnesses *for* Jesus and his significance without necessarily having seen him. Thus, both the NT and the documents under analysis differentiate between primary and secondary witness.

Thirdly, especially in TTL, witness is primarily expressive in that it does not proclaim something new or unknown but rather connects with what the Triune God has already mediated about himself. TCTCV shares this emphasis but balances it with the instrumental aspect. Within the NT semantic field of 'witness', an intentionally given witness is clearly instrumental: it does not point to that which is already known to all but gives genuinely new and crucial information.

This short semantic comparison shows that TTL and TCTCV do not use 'witness' completely coherently with the scriptural meaning of the concept. This is not to be criticized per se, as a field of meaning can grow when it comes into new contexts. However, as both documents explicitly connect their use of 'witness' with the scriptural *'martyria'*, the linguistic variation leads to a theological obscurity.

This article has shown that the ostensibly common discourse of 'witness' in TTL and TCTCV conceals a variety of theological views and that the connection to the biblical *'martyria'* is not completely intact. As the concept of witness is very central not only in the documents analysed here but in contemporary ecumenism by and large, it is of great importance that the ecumenical movement defines what it means by it. The multidimensionality of the concept might prove this task to be difficult. Nonetheless, open-mindedness and resolution in the face of this challenge could greatly benefit the ecumenical endeavour.