

ESSAY SUMMARY – CONTEXT SECTION
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The essays presented by Crofford-Maluleka, Nhlengethwa-Nkhata, Gonis and Velasco address different topics concerning the contextualization of the mission of the Church of the Nazarene in this century. Clearly, it would be a nearly impossible task to include *all* of the challenges that the Church faces regarding contextualization in all these essays, primarily due to the diversity of the global context in which the Church exists. However, all of the challenges that have been presented offer a wide sample of this priority for the agenda of the contemporary Church.

The Context and Fulfillment of the Mission

What is the role of the context in the fulfillment of the mission of God? This is the key question for the future of the Church because a holistic theology fulfills the purpose of articulating the message of God by revealing its relevance in each new context and challenge. We cannot eliminate the fact that the fulfillment of the mission is always effectuated in a context with specific socio-economic, historical, cultural and religious characteristics. Thus, the Church fulfills its mission by participating in a dynamic dialogue with its surrounding reality, seeking answers to our present needs.

The main significance of these essays lies in the fact that they allow us as an international Church to discover the various challenges that we face while also clearly showing us the importance and urgency of keeping this element at the forefront of all our ecclesiological perspectives. Undoubtedly, this is not an easy or simple task because there are no global ministry formulas that can be applied universally in a non-critical and non-reflexive manner in any and every reality without first considering the specific characteristics in which those multicultural contexts are found.

Our ecclesiological task becomes even more difficult when we consider the scope of vertiginous social changes, which have become the distinctive and growing characteristic of our generation.

The Many Challenges in the Fulfillment of the Mission of God

In our more than one century of existence, the theology and practice of the Church of the Nazarene have landed in different contexts around the world. The writers of these essays

have presented a small but important sample of some of the specific challenges that the Church faces in their varied contexts:

- a. Crofford and Maluleka discuss the challenge of divine healing in the context of the Church of the Nazarene in South Africa in the midst of a predominately charismatic environment, which presents a God that is interested in both the physical and spiritual aspects of human existence. The essay suggests the importance of understanding the topic of divine healing in light of a holistic and pragmatic African perspective marked by the historical consciousness of both the presence of malevolent powers and a philosophical worldview that covers the totality of life in the human and spiritual worlds. This worldview of African believers (including the Nazarenes) interprets the Christian life within the context of an ongoing spiritual battle against sinister powers based upon their biblical interpretation and reality. In this perspective, prayer for divine healing becomes the “end of the spear” to defeat the kingdom of the enemy and proclaim the Kingdom of God.
- b. Nhelengethwa and Nkhata present the challenge of contextualizing the mission before the reality of an HIV and AIDS pandemic in Swaziland and the sub-Saharan region of Africa. Facing this reality, the neo-Pentecostal realities have interpreted the causes of the illness and offered solutions based on the hyper-religious theologies present in the African context. The lack of a holistic approach based on the Word has opened the doors for these exclusively spiritual answers, leaving the contribution of medical prevention and treatment aside. Prosperity theologies, faith in faith itself and the positive confession have become part of these neo-Pentecostal proposals, changing the focus from a Christocentric gospel to one based on the interests and needs of the people, thus generating confusion and even frustration when the desired healing is not achieved.
- c. Gomis presents another challenge to the African worldview concerning the perspective of the constant opposition between Christ and Satan that creates fear amongst the people and the deficiency of not having received adequate answers to this reality in light of the Wesleyan tradition. The author examines the biblical and historical aspects of *Christus Victor* as an integrative alternative that presents Christ and His word as victor over all the powers and as liberator of all the dimensions of oppression. The African culture emphasizes the holistic and inclusive character of the vision of life, evidenced by the comprehension of the spiritual battle as well as in its popular approach which has mistakenly interpreted the biblical message and

syncretized it in order to dispel the fear to evil powers. The author proposes to establish a solid Biblical foundation for a correct understanding and the teaching of the *Christus Victor* as the permanent victory over all fear, sin, and demonic powers through the work of the Holy Spirit and the believer.

- d. Velasco analyzes the relationship between the organizational structures and the distinct values and theological denominational standards. The writer offers a historical overview of the process of institutionalization within the Church by considering the primitive Church, the Reformation, the Modern Project, and the Wesleyan Revival. He especially emphasizes the influence and dangers of institutionalization as warned by Weber. The essay highlights Wesley's contribution regarding "non-hierarchical structure" and "democratization" of the movement that tries to preserve human relationships and their functionality. The essay calls for a renewal of the organizational model of the Church of the Nazarene in such a way that it may prove to be coherent with our Wesleyan ecclesiology while taking into account the fact that the organizational structures are not in and of themselves non-theological. This renewal implies a valid biblical structure, culturally viable and temporally flexible. Finally, the essay extends an invitation to have an open, inclusive, critical and humble dialogue in the hope that bridges may be built and the organizational structure reconsidered in terms of the function of the people, who are certainly the Church of the Lord and that will become our distinctive mark as a holiness Church.
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Some guidelines to consider in the ecclesial task

In light of the different challenges that have been highlighted by these authors regarding the realities of their context, allow me to outline a few integrative points that must be considered in our theological reflection on this theme:

1. Ecclesiology and Worldview

As our church travels down the path of mission, it finds itself within diverse worldviews in different cultures where ministry is carried out (Gomis, Crofford, Maluleka). These "ways to perceive the world" grow culturally and historically and are filters utilized to interpret all reality, including the Christian faith. In the missional work of the Church, it becomes indispensable to understand these worldviews and examine them in light of the Pauline counsel (1 Thess. 5:21) because they allow us to understand certain aspects of the culture of a specific people group, and many times these new understandings will demand a redesign of our ecclesiastical practice.

2. Other theological approaches in the interpretation of realities

Another common element in the essays that have been presented is the influence of other theological currents upon the interpretation of reality of Christians around the world, including the Nazarenes. Crofford-Maluleka, Nhlengethwa-Nhkatha (“hyper-religions”) and Gonnis mention that in the African context the teachings of other theologies, especially of neo-Pentecostal character, have indirectly influenced all denominations to some extent. However, this is a reality that is also present in other latitudes of the world. The growing and irreversible process of globalization has made our world a smaller and better-connected place where the theological tendencies and evangelical styles are disseminated and imitated more easily.

This component that configures the contemporary global reality demands from the Church of God immediate answers infused with a biblical and theological coherence that preserve identity, clarifies uncertainties and avoids heresy.

3. A holistic approach to the experience of reality

The essays clearly show the need for the Church to care for people in a holistic manner (divine healing, HIV-AIDS, spiritual battles, etc.) The human being is a unit that cannot be separated, which implies that we cannot only pay attention to spiritual needs and completely discard the other dimensions of life. According to Scripture, there is no division between soul and body, the material and the spiritual; therefore, any human need can serve as an opportunity to show the grace of God.

4. A dynamic tension between identity and contextualization

Is it possible to contextualize and, at the same time, preserve our identity? It is important to clarify this distinction and the need to include both in our ecclesiology so that we do not run the risk of falling into dangerous extremes. Therefore, on one hand, there exists the danger of imposing peripheral elements of cultural nature “in the name of our identity” while at the same time leaving aside all of the central issues that have given us our sense of belonging and theological identity “in the name of contextualization” and the priority of specific elements that are proper for each reality. Each of the essays presented (Crofford, p. 11; Nhlengethwa, p. 12; Gonnis, p. 1; Velasco, p. 11) agrees that there is a need to elaborate pertinent answers to the challenges of context by taking into account biblical principles and by articulating our distinctive Wesleyan theology.

5. The role of education in the contextualization of mission

To understand, analyze, and make proposals to the multiple challenges within a Wesleyan perspective will demand including an in-depth study of different worldviews according to the contexts that influence the reading of the interpretation of reality in the process of Christian discipleship and programs of ministry formation (Crofford-Maluleka, p.8; Gomis, p. 9; Nhlengethwa-Nkhata, p.12). The understanding of context is not an intuitive task but an intentional process of discovery and learning. In the same vein, the production and diffusion of educational materials will become an invaluable resource to instruct believers regarding crucial matters that will allow them to relate their faith to their context.

The teaching of Wesleyan theology has an invaluable contribution to make as a response to the pressing needs of context because it presents a profound relationship between salvation and holiness, between spirituality and fellowship, between faith and obedience, and between devotion and service.

Questions for Discussion in Small Groups

1. What examples of challenges in contextualization can be mentioned in your own realities that demand answers in light of the Word and Wesleyan Theology? What types of worldviews exist in your context? How can the Church of the Nazarene respond relevantly to these challenges?
2. What are the limits between contextualization and doctrinal identity? How can we keep our identity as we offer answers to the multiple challenges of our contexts? To what extent can we contextualize the gospel without compromising its character and nature?
3. To what extent have other theological influences affected the identity of the Church in the Nazarene in its context? Are there any ministerial areas that we are neglecting and that are being carried by other theological currents?
4. What should the reaction be between the organizational structure and missional components of the Church as the body of Christ? Can you visualize any marks of institutionalization in the Church of the Nazarene in your context?
5. In what ways have the educational programs of ministerial formation in your own area responded to the need of preparing future generations of ministers for understanding the context and responding creatively to its challenges within a Wesleyan perspective?