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At the WCC assembly, delegates reaffirm mission, evangelism

by Fr. Tom Ryan by Catholic News Service

Busan, South Korea — A year after the Catholic Synod of Bishops met in Rome to reflect on the new evangelization, the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches affirmed the same topic.

Prepared by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in which the Catholic church is a full participant, the document, "Together Toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," was unanimously approved as an official statement of the WCC by the central committee at its meeting in Greece in September 2012.

It represents a common understanding of and commitment to God's mission today and is provoking keen interest as a fresh vision of evangelization for a new era. The only other official WCC position statement on mission and evangelism was approved in 1982.

Kirsteen Kim, an evangelical and professor of theology and world Christianity at Leeds Trinity University in Britain and editor of *Mission Studies* journal, was a drafter of the new statement and moderator of the WCC plenary session on mission in early November.

"The 1982 statement was produced before the end of the Cold War, the Internet, 9/11. There's a new landscape," she said. "Much has changed in terms of the theology of mission as well. The 1982 document talked a lot about kingdom of God, but the 2013 statement talks a lot about the Holy Spirit."

The 36-page statement is organized around four sub-themes: spirit of mission, spirit of liberation, spirit of community, spirit of Pentecost.

"It calls for the churches to communicate the good news with persuasion, inspiration and conviction,"

Kim said. "The text's objective is to inspire new witness. This new mission statement is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a new stage in an ongoing journey."

Divine Word Fr. Stephen Bevans, professor of mission and culture at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, was one of three speakers at the plenary session focusing on the new mission document. He highlighted the spirit of mission, recalling a quote from Pope John Paul II's encyclical "Redemptoris Missio" ("The Mission of the Redeemer"), "The Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the church's mission."

"The Spirit is at work in the world," Bevans said, "through the poor and the marginalized who are speaking to those of us at the privileged center. The Spirit is at work among all cultures, peoples and religions. The Spirit is at work in interreligious dialogue, inviting us to join in."

Another plenary speaker, the moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Syriac Orthodox Bishop Geevarghese of Niranam, India, highlighted an aspect of the document that he felt broke new ground: mission and the flourishing of creation.

"Mission involves care by humanity for nature, yes. But creation is also in mission to humanity. It also has the power to heal. It is not a mere agent of human concern, but an active agent of God's blessings. We are called to move beyond a narrowly human-centered approach and to embrace forms of mission, which express our reconciled relationship with all of created life. Our mission includes a quest for eco-justice."

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The portion of the statement on the spirit of liberation addresses what it calls mission from the margins. Geevarghese presented mission from the margins as the heartbeat of the document.

"People on the margins ... can often see where the center is out of focus," he said. "The Spirit chooses the vulnerable as agents to help fulfill God's mission of justice and peace. They challenge those who remain at the center by keeping other people on the margins."

In reflecting on how Jesus relates to and embraces those who are most marginalized in society, Geevarghese referred to Pope Francis.

"Spirituality is how we live our mission," he said. "There must be no mismatch between what we proclaim and what we live. The huge example of the present bishop of Rome is an expression of what this looks like."

Kim spoke of how spirit of community underlines how lack of full and real unity in mission harms the authenticity and credibility of God's mission in the world.

"Our love for one another is a demonstration of the Gospel we proclaim," Kim said. "Evangelism, therefore, inspires the building of interpersonal and community relationships."

Discussing the spirit of Pentecost, Kim said spreading the Gospel "is not only about truth; it's also about love and compassion."

"If we don't share with the world what we have been given, then we are withholding from them the source of our motivation and inspiration. Evangelism involves, however, not only the proclamation of our deepest convictions, but also listening to others and being challenged and enriched by them," she said.

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