

# **Mission of the Church - unifying or divisive factor for ecumenical relations?**

Based on the example of ecumenical relations between Ukrainian Baptist and Greek-Catholic churches

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## **Introduction**

Since February 2022, Ukraine has been living under the conditions of a full-scale invasion by Russia. The war, with its devastating consequences, has led to significant mobilization within civil society, with churches playing an active role. Ukraine, a country where all three major branches of Christianity coexist, nonetheless lacks an official ecumenical dialogue among its principal Christian traditions (Synod of Bishops of UGCC, 2019). While some Christian congregations have initiated cooperation on joint social projects during the war, the majority continue to operate independently in their social outreach efforts.

This paper draws on a master's thesis that investigates the ecumenical and social relations between two growing and socially active churches in Ukraine: the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. Employing a systematic theological method, combined with in-depth interviews with clergy from both churches, the study aims to identify key barriers and opportunities for ecumenical cooperation in the Lviv region. This paper specifically examines how differing understandings and practices of mission shape ecumenical engagement between these two churches.

Grounded in the conviction that mission is central to the life of the Christian church and that mission and Christian unity are deeply interconnected (The Church: Towards a Common Vision, 2013), this research posits that Ukrainian churches are called to respond together to the devastating consequences of war. The paper argues that differing approaches to mission may present significant obstacles to long-term ecumenical cooperation. It further suggests that acknowledging and addressing these differences is essential for fostering deeper, more sustainable collaboration between the churches.

To explore this issue, I will first define the key concepts of ecumenism and mission and outline their connection. Then I will introduce a model that identifies three dimensions of Christian mission—spiritual (evangelization), pastoral (social work), and prophetic (structural change)—which serves as the theoretical framework for analysis. Next, I will explore how this framework is reflected in the practices and priorities of the Baptist and Greek-Catholic churches in Lviv, drawing on qualitative interview data. Finally, I will reflect on how these differing approaches impact the potential for ecumenical cooperation and offer suggestions for advancing joint missional efforts, particularly in the context of war.

## Concepts of Ecumenism and Mission

To explore how differing approaches to mission influence long-term ecumenical cooperation between churches, we should first get the concepts of ecumenism and mission clear and explore their connection.

Church traditions and theologians emphasize different aspects of ecumenism, a diversity that is also reflected in the two churches examined in this study. For example, the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church defines ecumenism as the process aimed at the "restoration of the full unity of all Christians" (UGCC, 2015, para. 26). In contrast, Baptists do not adhere to a single, universally recognized position on ecumenism. However, Baptist theologian Steven R. Harmon (2016) suggests that the model of receptive ecumenism aligns well with Baptist ecclesiology, allowing churches to remain rooted in their own traditions while being open to learning from the gifts and insights of others (p. 152).

Although the differences in the understanding of ecumenism are not the primary focus of this paper, empirical findings indicate that these differences present a subtle yet real barrier to building ecumenical relationships between Baptists and Greek-Catholics in the Lviv region.

For the purposes of this study, ecumenism is defined according to Nelson and Raith (2017), who offer a comprehensive and widely applicable understanding of ecumenism. They define it as:

The full range of activities and efforts into which Christians and the Christian churches, at every level of membership and participation, invest time and energy for the sake of unity between them, a unity that, according to the Christian confession, is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and manifests itself in common faith and practice (p. 11).

Mission is an integral part of the nature and life of the Christian church, as Christian faith is "intrinsically missionary" (Bosch, 1991, p. 28). However, the understanding of the term mission has undergone significant transformation and remains ambiguous depending on the ecclesiastical context.

The debate over the church's mission and its role in the world has been ongoing since the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 (Stransky, 2002, p. 780). Originally, mission was understood primarily as the proclamation of the Gospel to the non-Christian world. This proclamation requires unity, and the ecumenical movement tries to achieve this unity. This model, referred to as *missio ecclesiae*, positions the church as the center of God's saving activity (Stransky, 2002, p. 782). The Edinburgh conference called for worldwide church unity to achieve global conversion (Castro, 2002, pp. 445–446), thereby directly linking ecumenism to mission.

By the mid-20th century, church leaders and theologians shifted focus to *missio Dei*, expanding the mission to include all of God's saving activities in the world—encompassing areas such as social justice, protection of the environment, and gender issues (Stransky, 2002, p. 782). Bosch (1991) further emphasized this shift, asserting that mission and evangelism are linked but do not have identical meanings, defining mission as "wider than evangelism" (p. 351).

The Lausanne Movement (Jackson, 2024) recently reinforced this understanding, advocating for integral mission, which includes both evangelism and Christian social action. It proposes adopting the missional *koinonia* framework, which emphasizes the holistic transformation of God's creation through partnership with God and one another.

Walter Kasper (2015) offers a clear distinction between two scopes of mission that are often conflated. He presents both broader and narrower understandings of mission, which serve as the theoretical framework for comparing empirical data gathered through interviews with clergy from both churches:

In a broad sense, mission means the fundamental vocation of the church to be the universal sacrament of salvation; in a narrower sense, it means the preaching of the Gospel and the establishment of new communities among human beings who have not belonged to the church (Kasper, 2015, pp. 292–293).

Theologically and practically, the pursuit of mission often necessitates ecumenical collaboration. As Lesslie Newbigin (1953) argued, the Church's missionary calling is compromised by internal divisions, making unity essential for a credible witness. David Bosch (1991) also emphasized that unity in mission and mission in unity are not merely for the benefit of the Church but serve humanity and aim to manifest the cosmic rule of Christ:

Ultimately unity in mission and mission in unity do not merely serve the church but, through the church, stand in the service of humankind and seek to manifest the cosmic rule of Christ (Bosch, 1991, p. 395).

These perspectives underscore that mission and ecumenism are not separate endeavors but are intrinsically linked, with the level of ecumenical relations directly impacting the churches' missional service to society. Given the current war in Ukraine and the many challenges facing its population, joint missional work among Christian communities has never been more urgent.

### **Type of Mission**

The question of the mission of the church has been addressed in a variety of ways by theologians and church leaders. In this study, a specific model developed by Emmanuel Katongole (2002) was adapted and applied, which distinguishes three different visions of mission and its relationship with the state: spiritual, pastoral, and prophetic.

1. **Spiritual Mission:** This approach focuses primarily on the spiritual well-being of church members. It assumes that a strong moral motivation from individuals within the church will enable them to respond effectively to external social challenges. This vision of mission is often linked to evangelization, in which the church's goal is to preach the Gospel, leading individuals to spiritual renewal. In this model, church members are seen as part of a moral elite, whose spiritual transformation can have a positive impact on society.
2. **Pastoral Mission:** This type of mission emphasizes practical service to society, embodying the church's role as "the healer and servant of the poor" (Katongole, 2002, p. 208). It entails a ministry of quiet service that attends to the immediate needs of individuals, such as providing food, shelter, and care for marginalized groups. While pastoral mission is rooted in love and charity, it is not typically focused on challenging or changing the broader societal systems that contribute to injustice and inequality. This vision aligns closely with social action projects undertaken by churches, such as caring for the homeless, refugees, orphans, and other vulnerable populations.
3. **Prophetic Mission:** This model, which is the most radical of the three, centers on the church's role in advocating for structural change in society. It is committed to advancing the coming reign of God and actively bringing about its realization in the present world. A prophetic church is prepared to take risks by speaking out against systemic injustice, engaging in civil society movements, and calling for reforms to corrupt state institutions and social structures. According to Katongole (2002), prophetic mission goes beyond individual evangelism or social service to become a force for deep social and political transformation.

## **Empirical Findings**

Building on the theoretical framework presented above, the empirical data from the interviews with clergy from both the Greek-Catholic and Baptist churches were analyzed to assess how their respective understandings of mission influence their actions in society and their potential for ecumenical cooperation.

The interviews were examined through the lens of Walter Kasper's distinction between the broader and narrower understandings of mission. Additionally, Emmanuel Katongole's three-dimensional model—spiritual, pastoral, and prophetic—was used as a framework for understanding how the clergy from both traditions view the mission of the church in relation to the war and the social challenges posed by it.

## Definition of Mission

The analysis reveals two distinct patterns in the definitions of mission provided by the clergy of the two churches. Greek-Catholic priests tend to define mission in the broader sense, viewing the church as an instrument of salvation for the world. For example, one priest describes the mission as "bringing the Kingdom of God," which involves "applying God's principles or biblical teachings to the way we live our social lives." At the same time, Greek-Catholic priests also emphasize the importance of evangelization, aligning with the narrower definition of mission.

By contrast, the Baptist pastors consistently focus on the narrower definition of mission, emphasizing the preaching of the Gospel and the making of disciples. One pastor defines the missionary aim as: "to make disciples, that is, to witness to Christ and convert people to God," while another emphasizes the Great Commission, where the church's primary task is to preach and make disciples of others.

## Type of Mission

While reflecting on the empirical data analyzed through the importance and practice of the three types of mission during the war: spiritual (evangelization), pastoral (social work), and prophetic (advocacy for structural change), the following observations were made.

Greek-Catholic priests were predominantly focused on pastoral mission, seeing social service as a key expression of the church's role in society, in particular during the war. They also viewed spiritual mission as essential, emphasizing preaching and administering the sacraments.

Baptist pastors, on the other hand, prioritized the spiritual mission of preaching the Gospel. They acknowledged the necessity of social work, particularly in times of war, but remained firmly rooted in the belief that evangelism is the core mission of the church. One pastor explains that "social service loses all meaning without evangelism, and evangelism without social practical help is weak." This highlights the Baptists' view that social work should always be closely linked to the proclamation of the Gospel.

While both churches recognize the prophetic mission, it is ranked as a lower priority. However, there are some notable examples of prophetic action at the level of church leadership. For instance, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO)<sup>1</sup> has facilitated joint actions, such as public statements condemning Russian aggression and calling for international support. This collaboration is a clear example of how churches can come

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<sup>1</sup> *UCCRO (Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations)* - an interdenominational institution that operates as an NGO and represents 90% of all religious organizations in Ukraine with an equal membership status. URL: <https://vrciro.org.ua/en/council/info>

together to make a unified stand on issues of critical importance, even when their overall approach to mission may differ.

### **Views on Spiritual and Pastoral Mission**

A significant finding from the interviews concerns the differing ways that Greek-Catholics and Baptists understand the relationship between social work and evangelization.

Greek-Catholic priests tend to view social work as a separate, albeit important, aspect of mission. One priest describes social work as a "silent mission," meaning that the church's social service activities are intended to help others without directly engaging in evangelism. In contrast, Baptist pastors emphasize the interconnection between social work and evangelism. They argue that social action should serve as a tool to facilitate the proclamation of the Gospel. As one pastor put it, "One of the tools of evangelism is social work."

This theological divergence could present challenges for long-term ecumenical cooperation. While both churches are engaged in spiritual *and* social missions, their differing views on the relationship between the two could limit their ability to collaborate effectively in mission. Moreover, due to the stereotypes and lack of awareness of the other, the definition of the common goal can be problematic. For example, one of the Baptist pastors posed a question about the mission of Greek-Catholics, as he was not sure about the goal they pursue: "I don't know what their (Catholic) mission is, or what it sounds like, so I can't say about...[..]"

Nevertheless, clergy from both traditions acknowledged the importance of agreeing on the ultimate goal of their joint missional efforts. They agree that ecumenical collaboration can take place in the realm of pastoral mission and evangelization, provided that it is rooted in a shared commitment to preaching Christ without proselytizing and focusing on the shared love to Ukrainian society.

### **Conclusion**

In the face of the devastating consequences of full-scale war in Ukraine, the missional calling of the Christian church becomes more critical than ever. This research shows that both Greek-Catholics and Baptists are actively engaged in spiritual and practical dimensions of mission, even if their theological understandings of the relationship between evangelization and social work differ. These differences are challenging to identify since they are not immediately apparent and are rooted in certain convictions and patterns of thinking and acting, making them harder to change and therefore posing a greater threat to the pursuit of unity.

Recognizing and respecting these differences, while focusing on shared values and purposes, is essential for effective ecumenical collaboration. This shared awareness creates a meaningful opportunity for joint missional engagement. Building upon the existing collaboration platforms,

but also organising new social action projects, there is a potential for deepening cooperation by focusing on a common goal: serving people affected by war through a united Christian witness that combines spiritual, pastoral, and prophetic elements.

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