

Dorottya Nagy*

BEHIND *MISSIO DEI*
Reflections on the International Missionary Council's 1952,
Willingen, Germany, Conference – One Possible Way
of Commemorating after Seventy Years

The Willingen Conference of 1952 is known for its supposed “paradigm shift” in understanding mission as missio Dei. This article offers theological and historical contexts for the conference and its multiple approaches to mission and the Church. This is done through a re-reading of some of the major texts at the conference and the reflection on these discussions. This reveals the search for a foundation for the Church's efforts in evangelization and mission, set in the particular historical moment after World War II and with rising tendencies towards de-colonization. The documents of the Willingen Conference still merit further studies, in order to discover and value the “paradigm” it elaborated and presented.

Introduction

Commemorating historical and Church-historical events, ecumenical conferences, publications of documents is a common theological-missiological practice. 2022 marks the seventieth anniversary of the International Missionary Council's (IMC) 1952 Willingen, Germany, conference. A conference which entered the collective memory of the theologians-missilogists as one which opened the Pandora box of experimenting and building theories on and with the notion of *missio Dei*. The modest aim of this contribution is to provide the readers with some reflections on mission theological ideas present in the inherited written material of the Willingen event. The reflections are done through a re-reading of a major part of the conference material as published in English and German and with the question in mind: what about *missio Dei*?

* Dr. Dorottya Nagy is Professor of Missiology at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam (Netherlands). Her research interests are migration, mission studies, Christianity in post-communist Europe, methodology, and theology. Her recent publications include together with Martha Frederiks *Religion, Migration, and Identity. Methodological and Theological Explorations* (Theology and Mission in World Christianity 2), Leiden 2016, and *World Christianity. Methodological Considerations* (Theology and Mission in World Christianity 19), Leiden 2021. She is the Assistant Editor of Mission Studies.

A re-reading of the Willingen texts in 2022 might lead to the conclusion that Willingen 1952 might have more to do with the concepts of reaching out and witnessing God than with the *missio Dei* formula. A re-reading of the Willingen texts may also lead to the conclusion that the conference could be seen more as the cradle of the missional Church theories, of the Moltmannian mission as coming of God, or mission as the embodiment of the eschatological hope (these latter two examples of the eschatological type of mission theologies), or even the cradle of the Arusha 2018 event with the theme “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship” than the cradle of *missio Dei* type theologies of mission. Such observations to be tested, however, need further research and go beyond the reach of this modest contribution. This article, written upon invitation, cannot go further than formulating some reflections for further conversations on, beyond or/and with *missio Dei* from the position of re-reading these texts as a theological educator who hardly has ever taught her students the *missio Dei* type of mission theologies.¹

Points of Departure

Missio Dei is one of the most yet meanwhile contested formulae in mission theology. In search for a shared understanding of *missio Dei*, Rolf Kjøde (2022), in a recently published article, looks at how the *Cape Town Commitment* (2010) and *Together Towards Life* (2013) work with this formula. His conclusion is that the only possibly shared ground between the authors and the faith traditions these documents represent is the necessity of a Trinitarian basis for any theology of mission, thus also for the *missio Dei* formula. If there is any shared ground to be found for a *missio Dei* formula, then that must relate to the “change from an ecclesiocentric to a Trinitarian paradigm of mission and to the understanding of the kingdom of God as the goal of mission” (Kjøde 2022: 219). The Trinitarian basis for mission theology keynoted with God’s kingdom is present in Pope Francis’ *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) and so it is in *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today’s World* (2016). These are recently written, well-received mission documents among Christians worldwide and are documents which receive aca-

¹ My first encounters with these texts were during a course on ecumenical theology at the Lutheran Theological University in Budapest in the late 1990s. The lens through which we read this material was the development of the ecumenical movement in relation to Eastern and Central European Churches. The notion of *missio Dei* was absent in those discourses.

demic attention as well (Bevans 2014, Kim 2015, Alva 2018, Vasiliadis 2017, Bargár 2017, Keramidas 2021).²

The common ground of a Trinitarian starting point for mission theology, however, does not herald a unified and homogenous ecumenical or one, common, and worldwide theology of mission; the common ground should not make one “become downright giddy about the future of missional-ecumenism in the church” (Amstrong 2015: 234) because: 1. the implementations of these texts still imply tensions, breaks, and isolation among different Christian groups sharing the same locality; 2. there are numerous recently written “ecumenical” documents which do not take such a Trinitarian basis when developing a mission theology (e.g. Plüss 2020); 3. the so-called official ecumenical and Church documents are not (and why should they be) the only sources for mission theology; 4. the various theological schools develop their own *missio Dei* genealogy; by doing so they continue to read each other’s texts with different hermeneutics leading even to misunderstandings of each other’s theories (Sonea 2017); and 5. the popular reference to *missio Dei* reveals the emptiness of the formula whenever neither God nor mission is being elaborated in depth; the absence of mission theologies allows the formula to fuel missional practices on (doctrinal) assumptions, essentialism, and stereotypes.

One of the best illustrations of what happens when the *missio Dei* formula does receive some elaboration, are writings which choose the method to search for a genealogy of *missio Dei*. The purpose of such a search remains hidden: why is it important to find out who exactly used the term *mission Dei* if the lack of the presence of a systematic theological relationship between the “popping up” of this term in different epochs, by definition leaves out any written sources about God’s mission beyond Latin as theological language? Or if the search for such a genealogy reveals that in fact *missio Dei* has been used by different theories of mission in different contexts, and with different agendas, how will that knowledge help theologizing on mission? What exactly is the role of genealogies of concepts or/and conceptual genealogies in mission theology? Whatever the case might be, the genealogical method, especially as done outside Roman Catholic and Orthodox circles, resulted in a hard-necked historiography of *missio Dei*. This genealogy/historiography usually anchors the formula in Augustine’s theology and seeks to make it solid through the link with the International Missionary Conference organized in 1952 in Willingen, Germany. It goes even further by acknowledging that although the formula as such

² It is beyond the reach of this contribution to link the Willingen material with these recent mission documents and research theological continuities and discontinuities on mission.

has not been explicitly used during the conference, it was “clearly” present through Karl Barth’s influence of the development of mission theology ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. The historiography then refers to the post-conference coining of the term *missio Dei* by Karl Hartenstein (1952) and Georg Vicedom (1958). Such a historiography leads to the statement that the 1952 Willingen event is a paradigm shift in theologizing on mission and the name of the new paradigm is *missio Dei*.

While John Flett, at the latest or already in 2010, demythologized the above sketched historiography, demonstrating that “Barth never once used the term *missio Dei*, never wrote the phrase ‘God is a missionary God,’ and never articulated a Trinitarian position of the kind expressed at Willingen” (Flett 2010: 12), such a genealogy remains operant in numerous text-books and theological foundations of missionary programs. It is as if such historiographies are needed in order to fill the absence of theologies of mission, and it is as if a simple reference to some authorities like Karl Barth, Willingen 1952, or Augustine would suffice to avoid any further trouble with the complex questions of mission theology.

In the line of deconstructing the *missio Dei* historiography, some theologians even went a step further than Flett did by arguing that the whole notion of *missio Dei* should be seen as outdated or at least problematic. Jacob Kavunkal SVD (2013) for example, proposes the notion of *extensio Dei* and seeks to develop a mission theology which perceives God’s relationship with the world as the divine self-reaching out. The image of reaching out, Kavunkal argues, might be a relevant one in contemporary times and it might help theology in moving beyond territorializing and colonizing terminologies. Echoing Kavunkal’s idea that the *missio Dei* formula is too much entangled with colonialism, Sarosh Koshy (2022) to a certain extent also resonating with John Flett’s understanding of mission and in critical dialogue also with Karl Barth, proposes a mission theology which centers around the notion of God’s witness, *martyrion Dei*. For Koshy, *marturion Dei*—this is the way Koshy spells the term—, “in contrast to the notion of sending [...] is a continuous act of God bearing witness to Godself on who God will be, toward which humans could continue becoming” (Koshy 2022: 7).

The deconstruction of the superficiality of those missiological discourses which hide behind a *missio Dei* formula has been done with numerous constructive and relevant theologies of mission, which again does not dismiss the usefulness of going back to earlier texts and reading them afresh, but assigns any commemorative exercise the task of being critical and being open to what can be discovered through a re-

reading conditioned by the time and locality of the one who re-reads them.

Texts Re-read³

In my attempt to engage with the classical texts produced at and around Willingen I took a rather pragmatic approach: I have limited myself to publications of the Willingen documents and some of their first-hand interpretations by some participants. The white men's gazes in these documents are uncontested; yet the plural form "gazes" indicates the different perspectives, also visible in texts written in English or German, but even within English or German texts; Willingen—or any ecumenical mission conference—should be looked at as contexts where creative tensions translate into minutes, texts, and adopted statements. The materialization of discourses (texts and images) mirrors power relationships, interests, and agendas. Below I list the documents I have re-read in order to help my readers better understand my arguments.

These are the texts I have re-read:

The International Missionary Council's *The Missionary Obligation of the Church; Willingen, Germany, July 5-17, 1952, International Missionary Council* (London: Edinburgh House Press 1952), hereafter MOC 1952. This is a pamphlet which published the statements of the conference: A Statement on the Missionary Calling of the Church, A Statement on the Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity, The Indigenous Church – The Universal Church in Its Local Setting, The Role of the Missionary Society, Missionary Vocation and Training, Reshaping the Pattern of Missionary Activity, A Statement by Younger Church Delegates, and a Report of the Committee on Interpretation and Action. The Foreword of the booklet calls attention to the fact that the report on the missionary obligation of the Church was presented but not adopted by the conference. Instead, the conference adopted the two above-mentioned statements on the Church. In the Introduction, "the I.M.C. commends the event called 'Willingen 1952,' with this brief note of its proceedings, to the prayers and the local missionary obedience of all who in their membership of the Church are members of a 'worshipping, witnessing, suffering and expectant community'" (MOC 1952: vi).

³ I would like to express my gratitude to the service of the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/>) for providing me with much of the Willingen material. Their service is much appreciated and valued.

The International Missionary Council's Minutes of the Enlarged Meeting and the Committee of the International Missionary Council, Willingen, Germany, July 5th to 21st, 1952 (London/New York: The Council 1952), hereafter Minutes 1952. The book, by that time sold for one shilling or twenty cents, is a rich resource for gaining new insights in the dynamics of the conference as captured through a particular lens and framed in a particular genre. Much information about the participants such as their names, affiliations, names of countries and denominations they came from, titles and positions, can be found in this book. An almost minute by minute conference program can also be reconstructed. It is remarkable to see that while many of the representatives from the "younger churches" (this term has been used with critique during the conference) were given tasks throughout the conference, the contents of their voices, with some exceptions, remain "unnoted" and none of them was given the task to deliver a conference address. An exception was Alfonso Rodriguez, the Rector of the Seminario Evangélico de Teología, Matanzas, Cuba, who in "The Calling of God – A Personal Testimony" embodied a unique voice or theology of mission through the notion of co-creation. Rodrigues travelled to Willingen already from a so-called dictatorship. Yet, as the title of his contribution shows: while the white men delivered lectures and addresses, rector Rodrigues was asked to share his personal witness in which he became contextual by not explicitly talking about political events. He did so, and by doing so left a piece of autobiographical and contextual theology of mission keyworded with disability, vulnerability, and a fresh look at mission as the Christians' participation in co-creating the world with God.

The International Missionary Council's *Missions under the Cross; Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952, With Statements Issued by the Meeting* (London: Edinburgh House Press 1953), hereafter MUC 1953. This volume was edited by Norman Goodall, who in the Introduction gave his own reading and reception of the conference. He even went so far that he formulated the essence of the conference in four points for the non-theologian readers. Goodall introduces the four points with four questions: 1. "What is the relationship between history and salvation history?" 2. "What is the meaning of Christian hope in relation to the message and practice of mission?" 3. "What is the bearing of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit on the nature of the Church and the Christian ministry?", and 4. "What is the theological significance of the 'foreign' mission within the total missionary responsibility of the Church?" (Goodall in MUC 1953, 20-22).

Cecil Northcott's *Christian World Mission: An Interpretation and Discussion Based on Themes and Findings of the International Missionary Council's World Conference on "The Missionary Obligation of the Church" held at Willingen, Germany, July 1952* (London: Lutterworth Press 1952). This material again is a personal interpretation by one of the conference participants and as such it even preceded the publication of the official documents. Northcott was a specially invited participant and secretary of the Interpretation and Action Committee and for some time home secretary of the London Missionary Society.

Northcott's material introduces another gaze on and source of the conference material: photography. He chooses a picture taken by Willi Klaur from Frankfurt of Elizabeth Theophilus from Madras, a young delegate, with her German host: an old lady sitting in a chair and Elizabeth standing before her in a greeting/thanking posture. The old lady imitates the hand gestures of Elizabeth while the picture captures well that this imitation is not yet the internalization of the full message behind Elizabeth's gesture. Elizabeth seems to have been one of the favored photograph objects because the WCC archives hold at least another picture of her. This time with the title: German boy bringing flowers to Elizabeth Theophilus, delegate from India to the International Missionary Conference in Willingen, Germany, 1952.⁴

Northcott chooses as motto of this first chapter of his book a fragment from the Statement on the Missionary Calling of the Church (MUC 1952, 190):

The Church is sent to every inhabited area of the world. No place is too far or too near. Every group of Christians is sent as God's ambassadors to the people in its immediate neighbourhood. But its responsibility is not limited to its neighbourhood. Because Christ is King of kings and Saviour of the world, each group of Christians is also responsible for the proclamation of His Kingship to the uttermost parts of the earth (Northcott 1952, 3).

He entitles his chapter 3 "The end of missions as we know them" and quotes Lesslie Newbigin, referring to him as "a slight, boyish figure" who "got up in the middle of the hall" and asked "frustrating and baffling" questions by remarking that "the mission to the ends of the

⁴ See <https://www.geneve-int.ch/node/3969#:~:text=Young%20German%20boy%20bringing%20flowers%20to%20Elizabeth%20Theophilus%2C,in%201910%20and%20brings%20together%20Protestant%20missionary%20council.> – Photograph under the title "Archives of the World Council of Churches – 1952: International Missionary Conference in Willingen, Germany" | Genève internationale (geneve-int.ch) [accessed 03.08.2022].

earth has got bogged down in trench warfare”; “the word missionary should recover its old meaning” (Northcott 1952, 17). In 1952, Newbigin was already in his early forties and spoke from his position as bishop of the Church of South India, yet a remark on his “boyishness” may allude to the contrast of those participants who were writing mission history for already forty to fifty years, and Newbigin who was still a young missiologist by that time. Interestingly, Northcott does not make any mention of the address Newbigin gave on “The Christian Hope” during the conference.

Walter Freytag (ed.), *Mission zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Vom Gestaltwandel der Weltmission der Christenheit im Licht der Konferenz des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen* (Stuttgart: Evang. Missionsverlag 1952). This volume is a first “German” reception of the Willingen event, and it is in this volume in which next to Walter Freytag’s report about the state of mission worldwide Karl Hartenstein’s theological reading of the Willingen event is published (51-73). This is the text in which he uses the term *missio Dei* in relation to the conference and it is this usage that became one of the main references when constructing genealogies of *missio Dei*.

Resisting Randomness?! A Less Academic Excursion

While preparing myself for and during the re-reading of the Willingen documents, I could not resist the temptation to recall some events and happenings of the year 1952. Writing this article in the July record heat in 2022 made me identify with the conference participants’ sweating in the July heat records of 1952 in Germany but it also made me realize that Willingen as a *Luftkurort* (climatic health resort) and a ski-jumping sport and touristic resort was most probably not the worst place for the participants to spend two weeks and reflect on mission, the world, and God.⁵

Browsing through the newspapers from 1952, I could not resist reading the headings in comparison with the newspaper headings I read in July 2022. In 1952 newspapers reported on the polio pandemic

⁵ Not all participants took Willingen as a touristic place. John Foster, for example, from the University of Glasgow, perceived Willingen as a village yet according to him it was the right choice to hold an international mission conference in a village: “It was a refreshing change, our rural setting keeping us so much nearer to ordinary life than could, for example, the artificiality of city hotels, or the academic withdrawal of a university town. [...] Besides, one only had to ask a few questions of the villagers to realize that just beneath the rural calm lay all the raging problems of our modern world” (Foster 1952: 26).

peaking in the USA or other parts of the so-called western world.⁶ They reported about the enthronement of Queen Elisabeth. The Leningrad affair was still going on (e. g. Brandenberger 2004); and while Eric Hobsbawm, another influential writer in historiography, was walking the streets of Leningrad (Evans 2019), he might have passed a woman carrying a child under her heart in those July weeks. A child to be called Vladimir Putin.

Reading that Charlie Chaplin, after forty years of residence, was denied re-entry in the USA, because senator Joseph McCarthy accused him of supporting left-wing activities, most visibly in his film *Lime-light*, linked to the situation of the countless artists labelled *personae non gratae* in today's world (see Wild 2017). Realizing that it was 1952 when Mother Teresa opened her first and interreligious hospice in a former temple of the Hindu goddess Kali, the goddess of among others change, time and destruction, links with discourses on "beautiful death" in 2022. In March 1952, Claribel Ba Maung Chain became Myanmar's/Burma's first female minister in the Union government (as Karen State minister) and the same Mrs. Chain was present at Willingen, as the delegate of the World's Student Christian Fellowship, and conducted the opening worship on the 11th of July (in Freytag 1952, 26). Most significantly, however, the newspaper reports spoke of the so-called Korean War. It was just less than two weeks prior to the Willingen event that this war, a remnant of WWII and another escalation of the Cold War, took another harsh turn. The Korean war as well had its entanglement with Christianity. One might think of how Billy Graham upon his visit "in the field" praises the work of Harold Voelkel: "You will thrill with many at the power of our God to change a rank Communist into a glorious Christian" (Graham, in Voelkel 1953, Introduction, n. p.). These words might be seen as one of the first of Graham's crusade ideology during the Cold War (see also Glass and Batóg 2020). The Soviet Union, China, the United States, the United Nations (Greece and Turkey as new members, then) all feature in those newspaper headings as they do today in my daily newspaper.

In Germany, too, much happened in the year 1952. The year began with a visit by Martin Niemöller—a German pastor, a controversial one in spite of the fact that he, too, had spent the last years of the Nazi system in a camp—in the Soviet Union in order to advocate the release of German prisoners of war.⁷ Germany is divided, Berlin is divided in

⁶ E. g. in Denmark, "Over 300 patients developed respiratory paralysis within a few weeks, and the ventilator facilities at the infectious disease hospital were completely overwhelmed" (West 2005: 424).

⁷ A remarkable assessment of his life-activity can be read in Matthew D. Hockenos (2018).

East and West, even if the wall was not yet there. In August the Roman Catholics organized their *Kirchentag* in Berlin under the motto “God lives,” the Lutherans held their *Kirchentag* right thereafter in Stuttgart with the motto “Choose the life.” Willingen, in its turn, unexpectedly won the competition to host the International Missionary Council’s conference. After hosting its first international ski-jump championship in 1951, the village seemed to be ready to grow into a larger touristic resort. Preparing for the conference meant that the church got a new tower and had been further renovated and the villagers, too, worked on their houses. Although in 1952 the village had only one church—a Lutheran one—among its residents there were numerous Roman Catholic war refugees. The war had left its scars on the village especially by the absence of those who had died in the war; the war happened in real in this village.⁸

By not resisting the temptation of holding up at least some flashcards on 1952, I invite the reader to critically reflect on how historiographies happen and how contingency too is part of history writing. These flashcards are but an example of such contingencies influencing re-readings and historiography. The “so what?” question, however, on Willingen and *missio Dei* remains. These flashcards, nevertheless, show that the participants at Willingen too were related to and were part of various socio-political, economic and cultural processes unfolding in 1952; even if they are rather silent about these processes, some of the above remembered events must have shaped their thoughts and ideas. Acknowledging the endless possibilities of re-reading the conference material, in what follows, I formulate some preliminary reflections at the margins of the texts re-read.

Various Voices and Understandings of Missions and God at Willingen

The Willingen event, like any other conference of the IMC, in spite of and together with the accepted statements, stands for a plurality of mission theologies, presentations and representation and also for various socio-political, including Church political sources. The manifold understandings of God and mission(s) detectable at the Willingen event could dismiss any tendencies which seek to introduce and present theory building on mission in the twentieth century mainly through sources linked to the history and development of only a few

⁸ More on this see at [Chronik-Heimat-u-Geschichtsverein3.pdf](#) ([rathaus-willingen.de](#)) and [Geschichte unserer Kirche: Kirchengemeinde Willingen](#) ([kirche-willingen.de](#)) [accessed 03.08.2022].

organizations, in this case the IMC and later World Council of Churches (WCC). Unfortunately, numerous authors mainly from Protestant circles, have chosen such a methodology when writing books and articles on the development of mission theology and by doing so, they created the image of a homogenous and clear-cut theology “constructed” throughout such conferences or identified main polarities which led to divisions (Bosch 1991, Philip 1999). Think of the evangelical-ecumenical divide.

The sources related to these gatherings, however, represent a particular group of people, people representing Churches, mission organizations, and other groups; participation through appointments, selection, special invitation and delegation are clear embodiments of power and hierarchical relationships. Such documents are but part of the sources based on which histories of mission theologies and systematic engagements with mission theology can be developed. Yet, in spite of the limited presentation and representation of the Church worldwide, the Willingen discourses created tensions also based on the different biblical hermeneutic of the participants.⁹ Karl Hartenstein closes his report on the conference by recalling, in his understanding, some of the main theological differences (Hartenstein 1952, 68ff.). Hartenstein raises the relationship between God’s kingdom, kingship, and Church as one of the major unsettled ecclesiological issues at Willingen. He explicitly refers to the different understandings the Anglicans and the “Dutch brothers” had on this matter and warns against losing the fullness of the New Testament’s message on the tension between the already and not yet. The question of world and Church, according to Hartenstein, disclosed the different understandings of this relationship. Hartenstein evoked the notions of *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* in order to define the Church’s position in relation to the world: the Church being in the world but not from the world (Hartenstein 1952: 70). The discussions on God’s kingdom urged the participants to display their understanding of eschatology and salvation as well. With this regard too, one cannot read the Willingen texts as unanimous.

⁹ E. g. Gerold Schwarz researched how Oscar Cullmann helped Karl Hartenstein in developing his theology of mission based on a particular reading of the Bible (Schwarz 1984). The dominance of a salvation history approach to the Bible and to mission theology is clear in the documents, yet, here once again one should be reminded that these texts are mainly produced by white western European or North American men. The Cuban speaker, Rodriguez, already in a short message problematized such a salvation-history approach to the Bible and to mission theology.

***Mission Theology Based on Relationality
through the Symbol of the Trinity***

Willingen can also be interpreted through the notion of relationality. The relational foundation for theologizing on mission is clearly visible in the Willingen documents. There were various relationalities which were given attention during the conference such as Church–mission, younger Churches–older Churches, world–Church, mission organizations and Churches, Christianity and politics, mission–world, Christians and other religions, past–present, lay Christians and missionaries, to name just a few.

The Relationship between Church and Mission

The most central relational issue was the relationship between Church and mission; the title of the conference underscored this centrality: The Missionary Obligation of the Church. The conference called for re-examining the relationship between Church and mission, more explicitly the relationship between “worldwide evangelization” and the unity of the Church (MOC 1953: iv). The theme and the title of the conference, at least for the German missiologists, must have recalled one of Gustav Warneck’s earliest publications, *Welche Pflichten legen uns unsere Kolonien auf? Eine [sic!] Appell an das christliche deutsche Gewissen*, written in 1885. The arguments on God’s mission have been formulated against the diversification and institutional rivalry channeled through Churches as organizations as related to “world-wide evangelism.”

The Church–mission relationship touches upon a set of mantras related to how Willingen has been received in theory building on mission since the second half of the twentieth century. One of such mantras is that at Willingen a paradigm shift took place from an ecclesio-centric missiology to Trinity/God-centric theology. I came across a surprising preservation of this mantra in Wesley Ariarajah’s *Foreword* to Koshy’s book, where he writes: “David Bosch in his *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis 1994 [sic!]), helpfully traces the developments, controversies, and disagreements that eventually led to the concept of *Missio Dei*, the Mission of God. Bosch rightly notes that the shift from ‘mission of the church’ to the ‘mission of God’ was a significant leap in our understanding of mission” (Ariarajah, in Koshy 2022, vi). The Willingen texts make this distinction but they do so either from the theological point of view that God, who continues to use the Church for His mission, will take care of this mission or that the Church needs to acknowledge that she has a mission (she is mission) because the God who initiated the Church is a God with mission. “Aus

der 'Missio Dei' allein kommt die 'Missio ecclesiae'. Damit ist die Mission in den denkbar weitesten Rahmen der Heilsgeschichte und des Heilsplanes Gottes hineingestellt" (Hartenstein 1952, 62).¹⁰

In my reading, by organizing a conference on *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, the organizers touched one of the most sensitive and complex theological issues of the time. The different participants had different questions about the relationship between Church and mission in the post WWII and already Cold War times. While there was quite a lot of discussion on the relationship between Church, mission, colonial times, and decolonization, and while there were some discussions about Christianity and Communism, especially through the lament on the political situation in China and the absence of delegates from China (some were there via Hong Kong and Taiwan), there was hardly ever any direct remark on the relationship between Nazi ideology and the identity of the Church.

The conference, in my reading, never dismissed the centrality of the Church in relation to mission but it both reaffirmed and redefined both of them—also because the context analysis made clear that “our nationalisms and racialisms and our new imperialisms [are] coming to birth as our old ones die away, each and all raising barriers to understanding. Rapid intercommunication does not necessarily lead to appreciation” (M. A. C. Warren in MUC 1953, 39). Next to a still outspoken superiority that “Europe still has much to give the world from its Christian storehouses” (Northcott 1952, 7) and worries about Communist territorialization, the idea that one should abandon dividing the world in mission fields and sending countries was clearly present in Willingen. “In a multi-racial society the churches are called to witness to the supra-racial character of Christ’s Church. In a world of national states they are called to assert the supra-national character of the Church” (MUC 1953, 199). Reading through the keynotes and statements, the contours of a missional ecclesiology with discipleship as key-term becomes visible, and it does so not only through Newbigin but also through Dibelius (MUC 1953, 123ff.) or Minear (MUC 1953, 64ff.).

Redefinition and reaffirmation of ecclesio-centric understandings of the Church at Willingen come close to each other. There is explicit mention for the need of a fresh and corrected understanding of what mission and Church are, yet, there is also the acknowledgment of the lack of the theological depth needed for such reformulations. “Die alte

¹⁰ “From the 'Missio Dei' alone comes the 'Missio ecclesiae'. Thus, mission is placed in the widest possible framework of the history of salvation and of God’s plan of salvation” (my translation).

Missionszeit ist zu Ende. Die neuen Formen einer Mission unter dem Kreuz zu finden, ohne der Bedrohung im geringsten zu entfliehen und der Anfechtung standzuhalten im Blick auf die alles überwindende Hoffnung des Reiches Gottes, ist die große Aufgabe der Mission in dieser Stunde” (Hartenstein 1952: 57).¹¹ Yet in spite of or together with this wish, Willingen also stated that “the nature of the duty and authority given to the Church to be His witness to all men everywhere” (MUC 1953, 189) cannot be questioned. J. C. Hoekendijk, presenting the report of a meeting of the Joint Committee of IMC-WCC held at Greyladies, Blackheath, June 30th to July 2nd, 1952 (note the travelling missiologists of the 1950s), underlined “the essential connection between the missionary function of the Church (its apostolate) and its obligation to be one (its catholicity)” (Minutes 1953, 35).

The ambivalence about a superior Christianity with territorialization aspirations felt at Edinburgh 1910 was not dissolved but displayed in different ways in Willingen: e. g., by a concrete mention of the fact that the Church is being sent on mission in all parts of the world, including Europe and the United States, and that mission and Church inherently belong together. “The mission of the Church will always transcend boundaries, but these can no longer be identified with national frontiers, and certainly not with any supposed line between the ‘Christian West’ and the ‘non-Christian East.’ The mission involves both geographical extension and also intensive penetration of all spheres of life” (MUC 1953, 191). The new understanding of the notion of the “indigenous church” as the “universal Church in the local setting” (MUC 1952, 195ff.) introduced a new understanding of the notion of “mission field” which now explicitly included Europe and other Christian parts of the world.

By calling attention to the Church-mission relationship and thinking in paradigms, Willingen did not dismiss the paradigm of centrality of the Church but reinforced it in its reading of Christianity’s situation in the world and a “strategic” (some of the Willingen participants used rather strong militant theological language) desire for unity. The wider ecumenicity as further realized with the participation of the Roman Catholics as observers and the Orthodox theologians as members of this particular ecumenical movement was still distant but the direction towards uniting Church and mission as translated in the 1961 New Delhi Meeting was already visible.

¹¹ “The old missionary era has come to an end. To find the new forms of a mission under the cross, without escaping the threat in the least and withstanding the challenge in view of the all-conquering hope of the Kingdom of God, is the great task of mission in this hour” (my translation).

The Relationship between Church and World

The previous sections already revealed something about how Willingen problematized the world–Church relationship. One of the important layers, however, remained implicit: the relationship between Churches and political ideologies and the entanglement of these with the participants and how they functioned as public theologians in different political systems. The *missio Dei* genealogy marked with Karl Hartenstein hardly ever sets Hartenstein’s *missio Dei* theology in the socio-political context to which it belongs. Hartenstein’s first mention of the term is known from 1934. He used it in a text in which he argued for the importance of mission rooted in a correct understanding of God and an understanding of the Church rooted in Christ. This text was written on financial matters in the midst of a serious financial crisis and the ideology which cut off mission as meaningless “activity” of the Church and needless internationality (Hartenstein 1934).

The relationship of mission, Church, and politics had embodied representations at Willingen in the persons of bishops and political personalities. This happened to such a degree that the president of the German Federal Republic, Theodor Heuss, took the effort to write a letter to the conference in which he thanked the non-German missionary societies for supporting the numerous German missionaries and Churches they worked with “at time when their contacts with their German home country were broken by the unhappy war” (Minutes 1952, 11).

Like other aspects of the conference, the German representation, too, evokes ambiguity on representations of the Church, mission, and politics. Among the participants at Willingen one finds a couple of prominent German theologians whose long-spanning activity between the Weimar Republic and post-WWII Germany left its mark on the development of mission theology through its institutions in Germany. Willingen disclosed much of the Protestant missiology’s complicity with the Nazi ideology or at least its origins but also the theological dilemmas of missiologists. In an article titled “Survival of the Fittest’: German Protestant Missions, Nazism and Neocolonialism, 1933–1945,” Werner Ustorff (1998) problematizes the dilemmas German missiologists had during the Nazi period:

There is no way of understanding the actions of leading mission thinkers in the years 1933–1945 unless one becomes aware of the serious crisis and the equally serious temptation they were in. The temptation can be mapped out by describing the expectations many missiologists had. Influential was the speculation with the idea that the Nazi

movement could be the right sort of companion in the missionary task of what they saw as the re-Christianization of Europe (106).

At least two of the German participants of the conference, Otto Dibelius and Walter Freytag, had such complex personal histories of how their missiology linked to politics. For example, Otto Dibelius did join the Confessing Church, but he first welcomed the election of Adolf Hitler to the extent that in his sermon on the 21st of March 1933, upon the reopening of the Reichstag (after the fire in February 1933), Dibelius expressed his belief in a new future under this leadership (Brenchmacher 2013, Kopke and Treß 2013, Gailus 2022). As Gailus argues, there is an urgent need for a new Dibelius biography which discloses the ambivalence inherent in the theology and work of this theologian. The newest Dibelius research, too, has its consequences of a re-reading of the Willingen material. As an example: What exactly are the implications of the terminology Dibelius uses in his sermon delivered in Willingen? Why is there such a silence about Auschwitz at this meeting? To state that the Willingen conference caused a paradigm shift in mission theology and it is the place where *missio Dei* originates, needs to be read with the ambivalences and challenges represented by the persons present at this conference and their biographies. What could the implicit theology of mission understood as God's mission mean for a Dibelius or a Freytag in 1952?

With Freytag the whole issue of colonialism enters the discourse as well. Freytag as the colonial expert (Ustorf 1998) did influence not only how the political state constructed an image of the European other at the colonies but also how "inter-cultural" theology under the motto of "God's mission" developed, whatever that may imply. Looking at the Willingen dynamics this link too needs to be given more attention. A critical reading of how these theologians related to the Nazi ideology cannot be separated from their disappointment in their understanding of the ideology of the Weimar Republic. Nevertheless, acknowledging the ambivalence in the theological development of these persons, any reference to notions such as "new," "beginning" (e. g. Freytag and Hartenstein 1952) needs to be critically reflected upon. What exactly was new at Willingen?

At Willingen there was thus a group of German theologians who struggled with God's mission from disappointment or partial disappointment with political ideologies but also another group of theologians who still had the hope and the confidence to speak about a "new world" also in terms of politics (and new ideologies) in spite of or together with the realities of the Iron Curtain and a transnational Communist reality. But not only the German participants, all participants

had their own histories of puzzling with the Church–mission–politics conjunction. Re-reading biographies of the Willingen participants¹² and research on how those biographies shaped the dynamics of the Church–mission–politics relationship in the last hundred years or so might lead to new insights in theory building on mission.

It is through these two major relationships—Church–mission and mission–world—that the Willingen group looked for some shared theological ground based on which theologies of mission might be developed.

The Trinitarian Agreement

As repeatedly stated, in order to work towards the unity of the Church for mission and the witness of the Church in the world, Willingen aimed at a minimum of a shared understanding of mission. This is where the Trinitarian symbol becomes relevant. The most concise expression of this Trinitarian agreement at Willingen is this: “The missionary movement of which we are part has its source in the Triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His own beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father in that perfect love which is the very nature of God” (Minutes 1952, 54).¹³ The accent laid upon the love of God, according to the Willingen consensus, calls for a threefold response, to wit: mission, worship, and unity. By this formulation, the multilayered concept of mission has been placed in the relationality of worship and unity. Such a statement cannot be read separate from the IMC being part of an ecumenical movement, also through its relationship with the World Council of Churches, and without the knowledge how mission and Church became “one,” e. g. in the vision of the ecumenical movement in 1961.

¹² One of such fascinating biographies is *Karl Hartenstein: Ein Leben für Kirche und Mission* written by a circle of friends and edited by Wolfgang Metzger in 1953. This book in itself might be read as a reception of Willingen. Karl Hartenstein died in October 1952, just a few weeks after Willingen and the *Kirchentag* in Stuttgart. See also Verwiebe 1948 and Schuster 2002.

¹³ Interestingly, Lesslie Newbigin, who urged the translation of Vicedom’s theology of mission into English and compared its importance to Gustav Warneck’s work, in his *Foreword* to the English translation of Vicedom’s book, in a subtle way, quotes the Willingen text as a correction to how Vicedom himself works with the same quote: “that ‘the missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself.’” (Newbigin, in Vicedom 1965: vii). It is thus the missionary movement and not *missio Dei* Willingen talks about.

The Report of the Committee on the Missionary Obligation of the Church (Lesslie Newbigin took the lead in writing the text), speaks of mission as 1. belonging to the purpose of the Church in witnessing of the hope that in God's love Christ will make all things good; 2. belonging to the life of the Church as the Church continues to embody God's love through the Spirit; and 3. "Those who are sought out, gathered together and transformed by Christ are the Church. Their very existence, therefore, springs from God's sending forth of His Son. In this sense 'mission' belongs to the basic structure of the Church" (Minutes 1952: 89).

Hartenstein also highlights this inherent relationship between mission and Church. I have already postulated that the Willingen conference reaffirms and does not dismiss the importance of the *missio ecclesiae*. Because there is *missio Dei*, it is legitimate to speak of *missio ecclesiae* (see Hartenstein 1952, 62 as quoted above).

Hartenstein's 1952 formulation repeats his earlier usage of the term *missio Dei*. As already described, in 1934 Hartenstein writes this text in the midst of a serious financial crisis and the ideology of Nazi Germany cutting money for mission. Hartenstein calls attention to the essence of mission, which is God who calls and sends, the apostles and the Church:

Die Mission steht und fällt mit der Wirklichkeit und der Wahrheit des lebendigen Christus, mit Seinem Wort und mit Seiner Sendung. [...] Darum ist die Mission heute aufgerufen, nach allen Seiten hin immer neu vor Gott sich zu prüfen, ob sie ist, was sie sein soll: *missio Dei*, Gottes Sendung, ja von Christus, dem Herrn, den Aposteln gebotene Sendung: „Gleich wie mich der Vater gesandt hat, so sende ich euch“ – und Antwort auf den von den Aposteln auf Grund ihres Wortes der Kirche aller Zeiten weitergegebenen Ruf: „Gehet hin in alle Welt“ (Hartenstein 1934, 217).¹⁴

As already mentioned in this article, a particular interpretation of Willingen's importance as causing a "decisive shift" in Protestant mission theology "by the radical rethinking of theology of the great German theologian Karl Barth" as "mediated to mission thinkers chiefly through the German mission leader Karl Hartenstein" (Kim 2010, 27-

¹⁴ "Mission stands and falls with the reality and truth of the living Christ, with His Word and with His mission. [...] For this reason, mission today is called to examine itself before God anew in all directions to see if it is what it should be: *missio Dei*, God's mission, indeed the mission commanded by Christ the Lord to the apostles: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'—and response to the call given by the apostles to the church of all times on the basis of their word: 'Go into all the world'" (my translation).

28) is hardly sustainable. References to Barth within the documents are exceptional. As a matter of fact, the only occasion where a direct reference to Barth is given is in the address of John M. Mackay on the Great Commission. Mackay refers to Barth's arguments against how infant baptism, detached from discipleship, was being ministered in a secularizing Europe (MUC 1953, 137). Nor did Hartenstein refer to Barth in his report on the conference. As a matter of fact, in 1952, just a few months before his death, Hartenstein was already beyond his Barthian period and was much closer to a mission theology based on the eschatology of the coming Lord as later elaborated by Moltmann than to Barth's pre-1952 writings (see Hartenstein 1952, 72).

What was new or at least prominent in Willingen was the acknowledgement of the poor theological foundation of the missionary practice, a desire for developing responsible (responding to the context) mission theologies, and a common understanding that mission theology can only be developed in relationality at large. As argued above, the theological language, closest to this desire for revisiting the complex relationality in terms of mission history, present and future, was the symbol (or creed) of the Trinity. The ideas, however, about how a mission theology based on a Trinitarian understanding of God can be further developed were most various already at Willingen. Thomas Schirrmacher even goes so far as stating that while the historiography of the *missio Dei* and its Trinitarian grounding remained an empty term or at least a consensus formula ("eine reine Worthülse"), it could be adopted and used with different purposes by different groups even within the ecumenical circles, and could be used even for arguing for a Church without mission (Schirrmacher 2011, 18-21).

Parallel Entries in Theory Forming on Mission Based on the Trinitarian Symbol

While Schirrmacher's arguments are valid to a certain extent, my limited re-reading of the Willingen documents sheds light on a couple of parallel theological entries through which the *missio Dei* (an articulated accent of the act of sending) was designed already at Willingen: mission of God as the mission of the Holy Spirit, missional Church and discipleship, and the end of salvation history.

The framework of this contribution does not allow a thorough elaboration of the link between Willingen and the missional Church types of theologies of mission and/or the centrality of the notion of discipleship (again notions and theories linked to recently adopted mission documents) nor does it allow to draw a line between the tensions around a salvation historical approach to mission which might have

led to what Bradford E. Hinze (1991) calls “the end of salvation history.” These points need further research into the Willingen material. Yet, I cannot end this contribution without a more explicit reflection on the spiritual turn already present at Willingen.

***Willingen as the Cradle for a Missio Spiritus Type
of Mission Theologies?!***

While much ink has been spilled by theologians on demonstrating the Trinitarian understanding of mission present at Willingen, scholars who propose a spiritual turn in and for mission theology (Kim 2010, Yong 2011) or who point to the importance of the Holy Spirit for mission theology in the recent mission documents (Alva 2018, Kim 2021) seem not to give much importance to Willingen in this respect. I argue that among the parallel theologies envisioned on a Trinitarian basis and among the more dominant Christological ones, bishop Dillistone’s keynote (in MUC 1953, 81-92) offered a model which prioritized the Holy Spirit for developing a new theory of mission. It is almost iconic to mention that Dillistone’s keynote address was concluded by prayers led by the already mentioned Miss Elizabeth Theophilus from India. It seems that the importance of Dillistone’s keynote for the spiritual turn in mission studies has not yet been discovered but such a discovery may contribute to a change in Willingen’s reception history.

Dillistone began his keynote entitled “The Dispensation of the Spirit” (Dillistone in MUC 1953, 81-92) by evoking the theology of mission of Frederick Denison Maurice, who already a hundred years before Willingen envisioned a shift from a mission theology based on the justification by the Son to a mission theology based on the presence of the Spirit. He then referred to an assessment of the IMC conference themes so far as a development toward acknowledging a Trinitarian basis for mission. In this process, Willingen should be or could become the event which focuses on the Holy Spirit at least through the Holy Spirit’s importance for communication and for “building up” community. Dillistone delivers his keynote by a rereading of the Bible through a pneumatological lens with the purpose to help constructing new theories of mission. He does not mention salvation history at all. Instead, he explains the coming of the Spirit as “His coming may not be as we expect, but however He comes, He will, as Cyril of Jerusalem said, herald the dawning of a new day within the soul. He comes to save and to heal, to teach and to admonish, to give strength and comfort and light” (Dillistone in MUC 1953, 91).

Frederick William Dillistone being asked for a keynote can be explained by his works published prior to the conference, especially his

The Structure of the Divine Society in 1951 (Dillistone 1951). In this book he regularly discusses Barth. Dillistone is especially critical about how Barth writes about the covenant in his *Dogmatics in Outline*. Dillistone critiques that the notion of covenant becomes irrelevant because “[i]t is impossible to build up a doctrine of the Church in covenantal terms when the word itself is used to represent a purely arbitrary action of a deterministic kind. It is not thus that the Christian Church has understood its existence within the Covenant of Jesus Christ” (Dillistone 1951, 209). Prior to the conference, Dillistone also authored *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Today* (1947) and *The Significance of the Cross* (1944) in which he links the vocabulary of the cross (sacrifice, justice, suffering, salvation, victory, deliverance, freedom) with life conditioned by war and revisits the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual turn in Willingen can be detected at least in three more cases. Goodall already in the *Introduction* points to the importance of dealing with the pneumatological question because without that it is meaningless to talk about the unity of the Church (MUC 1953, 21). More importantly, the Statement on the Missionary Calling of the Church formulates that

On the foundation of this accomplished work God has sent forth His Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to gather us together in one Body in Him, to guide us into all the truth, to enable us to worship the Father in spirit and in truth, to empower us for the continuance of His mission as His witnesses and ambassadors, the first fruits and earnest of its completion. [...] By the Spirit we are enabled both to press forward as ambassadors of Christ beseeching all men to be reconciled to God, and also to wait with sure confidence for the final victory of His love, of which He has given us most sure promises (MOC 1952, 3 and MUC 1953, 189-190).

A last remarkable fact which points to the “spiritual turn” unfolding at Willingen is the Pentecostal presence to the extent that a Statement of the Pentecostal Leaders presented and submitted by David F. du Plessis—till the summer of 1952 general secretary of the World Pentecostal Fellowship—has been included in the volume with the statements and keynote addresses of the conference. Du Plessis expresses with rather militant images the desire of the Pentecostal Churches for reciprocity of Churches for the sake of the Church and her unity in Christ.

The above listed observations on the spiritual turn once again invite to a re-reading of the Willingen material from a pneumatological perspective and together with the discourses on pneumatological priorities in theory building on mission. The pneumatological turn seems to

be indeed a shared trinitarian and more ecumenical basis for looking at Christian identity and its various perceptions in the worldwide connectivity.

Towards a Conclusion and Invitation for Further Research

The reflections behind *missio Dei* as formulated in this article shed some light on the complex interactions, various expectations, and different agendas present at Willingen. As the conference reports, one edited by Goodall and the other by Freytag, demonstrate, the Willingen event has been read and received differently by various groups and has been used for different purposes in different theological contexts still largely shaped by national Churches.

I have demonstrated that various theologies of God have been expressed in Willingen and it would be worth experimenting in discovering the origins or at least the links between Willingen and more recent theories/theologies of mission behind Willingen's *missio Dei* façade. I reflected upon the spiritual turn as already present at Willingen; this turn, however, could be seen also as a "milestone" for resetting both soteriologies (especially theologies of religions) and eschatologies (the coming of God, hope) which inform theories of mission. I pointed to possible links between missional ecclesiologies, theories of discipleship, and end of salvation-history ideas present at Willingen. All these aspects and dimensions are there in the Willingen material. The task remains to dig further and make sense of them. To adopt Karolin Wetjen's (2020) phrase to this context: Willingen 1952 too was at least a place where "Mission als theologisches Labor" (Mission as theological laboratory) was operating at least in the perception of some two hundred elected participants from some places of this planet. The material produced there and inherited invites contemporary theologians to create laboratories and work on the concept of mission.

On a methodical and didactical note: such a re-reading exercise might inspire colleagues to develop a webinar on re-reading these texts. Such re-readings might lead to a critical edition of the Willingen texts which might compel filling in with contents some empty types of *missio Dei* theologies. Re-reading these texts together with Roman Catholic and Orthodox colleagues—remarkably absent at Willingen—might result in even larger projects on ecumenical theologies beyond the genres of conferences and statements.

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ABSTRACTS

Die Konferenz von Willingen 1952 ist für ihren angeblichen „Paradigmenwechsel“ im Verständnis von Mission als *missio Dei* bekannt. Dieser Artikel bietet einen theologischen und historischen Kontext für die Konferenz und ihre vielfältigen Ansätze zu Mission und Kirche. Dies geschieht durch eine erneute Lektüre einiger wichtiger Texte der Konferenz und die Reflexion dieser Diskussionen. Dabei wird die Suche nach einer Grundlage für die Bemühungen der Kirche um Evangelisierung und Mission deutlich, die in der besonderen historischen Situation nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg und angesichts der zunehmenden Tendenzen zur Entkolonialisierung stattfand. Die Dokumente der Konferenz von Willingen verdienen noch weitere Studien, um das von ihr erarbeitete und vorgestellte „Paradigma“ zu entdecken und zu würdigen.

La Conferencia de Willingen de 1952 es conocida por su supuesto “cambio de paradigma” en la comprensión de la misión como *missio Dei*. Este artículo ofrece contextos teológicos e históricos para la conferencia y sus múltiples enfoques sobre la misión y la Iglesia. Para ello se releen algunos de los principales textos de la conferencia y se reflexiona sobre estos debates. Ello pone de manifiesto la búsqueda de un fundamento para los esfuerzos de la Iglesia en materia de evangelización y misión, enmarcados en el particular momento histórico posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial y con las crecientes tendencias hacia la descolonización. Los documentos de la Conferencia de Willingen aún merecen ser estudiados más a fondo, para descubrir y valorar el “paradigma” que allá se elaboró y presentó.

La Conférence de Willingen, en 1952, est connue pour son « changement de paradigme » supposé avec le concept de mission comme *missio Dei*. L'article présente les contextes théologique et historique de la Conférence et de ses multiples approches de la mission dans l'Église. Il le fait à travers une relecture de quelques-uns des textes majeurs de la Conférence et de la réflexion au cours des discussions. Cela révèle la recherche d'un fondement pour les efforts de l'Église dans l'évangélisation et la mission, replacés dans le moment historique particulier de l'après seconde Guerre mondiale et des mouvements vers la décolonisation. Les documents de la Conférence de Willingen méritent d'être encore étudiés pour découvrir et évaluer le « paradigme » qu'ils ont élaboré et présenté.