

MISSION SYMPHONY
Notes for the Third Millennium

with Leader's Guide



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OVERTURE



Chapter III of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Order*, Part One, Form of Government, begins with a twenty-three-word definition of mission for Presbyterians (see below).

I propose that we consider this definition, from a musical perspective, as an overture. For instance, Beethoven begins his Fifth Symphony with an initial statement of a four-note theme on which he will build the rest of the work. On first hearing those notes, one wonders how such a simple sequence of sounds can become a symphony. Yet as one listens with those notes in mind, Beethoven’s mastery of his craft emerges.

It is helpful to think of the first sentence of G-3.0100 as the opening strains of a symphony. When presented in boldface type, the key words of the chapter become evident:

The **mission** of the **Church** is given form by **God**’s activity in the **world** as told in the Bible and understood by **faith**.

“The Mission of the Church” is the topic to be defined, the title of the symphony. The other four words serve as the framework of movements for the symphony, the motifs that will be explored so that their richness and power can be appreciated.

The foundation for the “mission of the Church” is God. *God* is mentioned 25 times in this definition. Considering that the boldface key words appear a total of 73 times in chapter III, God is very important for a Presbyterian understanding of mission. It is also significant that *Jesus* is used 8 times and *Christ* 13 times, which increases the total to 46 times, almost two-thirds of the occurrence of the key words.

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As the themes are developed, the qualification in the initial statement, that God's activity is the focus, becomes more evident. In contrast to G-1.0100, where God's intent regarding the re-creation of God's people through the life and work of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is discussed theologically, this chapter focuses on God's activity.¹ It is what God has done and is doing that provides direction for the Church.

The second key word in this definition is *Church*. The capital letter **C** stands for a wider community than those people with whom we worship and work, though it includes us and them. Presbyterians recognize that our profession of faith in Jesus Christ makes us a part of the larger Church, including those we meet in governing bodies beyond the session. The long Presbyterian tradition of ecumenical involvement spreads the circle of faith even wider.² The word *Church* appears 10 times in this chapter.

Consistent with the Confession of 1967, this initial announcement of the key motifs indicates that mission is the business of the Church. "God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are at the heart of the gospel in any age."³ We will have opportunity to explore the connection between the Confession of 1967 and G-3.0000. For now, it is sufficient to recognize how these two documents provide substance to the theme of chapter III.

The third key word is *world*. "That God so loved the world" introduces John 3:16, a fragment of Scripture that most Protestants know. *World* appears 10 times in G-3.0000. This motif is developed in interesting and unexpected ways, ways that are refreshing and challenging to customary understandings as this chapter proceeds.

Faith is present throughout this chapter, implicitly rather than explicitly (except for the first sentence). The word *faith* appears three times in this chapter.⁴ It will become evident that faith is a leit-motif, a subtle theme developing through the course of the chapter.

Each paragraph will be presented as a separate movement in this symphony, ending with a return to the initial statement. Along the way, the musical metaphor will develop as the different movements emerge. There will be changes in mood and tempo as the symphony develops. The conclusion comes as a turn from appreciation to participation, to responding to God's call.

"Movement" is a key concept that serves to keep the key words together, as it suggests overtones of dynamism, action, intention.

These are essential for any discussion of our mission as Presbyterians. While most of us agree that mission is essential to the Christian life, the issue that troubles us is knowing what sort of action is required. For some, mission requires geographical and international movement, carrying the good news of Christ to the ends of the earth. To others, mission is moving out into any area of suffering and human need, wherever it is on the planet, even in our own backyards.

I learned this theme at home, growing up. Both emphases were present whenever my family sat down to a meal. I learned early on that debates about mission were family quarrels, matters that could move discussions into arguments, and even beyond, because my father had a fundamental orientation, while my mother's views were more modern. What I learned at home has been true of our Presbyterian family for centuries. It is a fact of life for us. Distressingly, we seem unable to agree that mission is multifaceted, a responsibility that goes beyond what any of us are able to do.

Chapter III of the Form of Government in our *Book of Order* reminds us that our mission always needs to be faithful to God's activity in the world. God, who endows the Church with a diversity of gifts, calls each of us to respond in faith and love in community with others. God works in many ways through God's Spirit. Humility requires us to celebrate God's activity, however it is accomplished and by whomever. To decide that the Christian mission can be accomplished in only one way is to intrude on God's sovereignty. Such a stark way of settling the point may remind all of us that we must, for the sake of the gospel, work together.

As we discuss what chapter III has to say about mission, let us bear in mind that it is God's action we are called to assist. When we read that mission is "given form by God's activity in the world," let us carry with us the understanding that mission is not only work on behalf of the church; it must also be implemented as God in Christ has shown us in Scripture and faith. We will never achieve a perfect duplication of "God's activity in the world," but we can remind one another that we are all, with our different and even diverse gifts, seeking together to be faithful witnesses.

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NOTES

1. For reflections on G-1.0100, see William E. Chapman, *Finding Christ . . . in the Book of Order* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2003).
2. Note G-2.0300–.0400, where the broader community of faith is articulated. Also pertinent are G-15.0000, “Relationships”; 16.0000; “Union Churches”; Appendix C, “A Formula of Agreement”; Appendix D, “A Statement of Ecumenical Consensus.”
3. *Book of Confessions*, 9.06.
4. *Faith* is referred to extensively in G-2.0000, “The Church and Its Confessions.”