



ACCOMPANIMENT



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



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I. INTRODUCTION: EMMAUS STORY

Imagine that you have parked your car, and are walking down the sidewalk toward a dinner with some people you don't know very well. One of your dinner companions parks nearby, and since you had to park quite far away from the restaurant, you walk together, awkwardly getting to know one another, sharing your sadness—awful things have been happening, and all your hopes for the future seem to have been overthrown. Your new acquaintance shares her own pains and griefs, and you discover that you have much in common, but somehow you only seem to become sadder as you walk down the street together. And then someone else joins you—someone you have not met before—and then he begins to speak to both of you about your pain, your loss, your fears and about how God had been present in all of this. You are shocked—you and your new friend look at one another, wondering how this person can speak so without even knowing you, yet feeling your hearts lift together at the good news. You invite him to join you for dinner, and together you eat and share and begin to feel hope once again. And then, suddenly you recognize him—and he tells you to share with others all the good news that has come from the encounter.

We imagine that this can not happen in real life. It is a Bible story, something that happened two thousand years ago, when the disciples on the road met the resurrected Jesus on the way to Emmaus. Yet it does and can happen today, every day, when we remember that the good news comes from Christ, who joins us whenever two, or three are gathered in his name. We, and our acquaintances on the road, are all part of the body of Christ. We walk the Emmaus road every day and the people with whom we share the journey accompany us and we accompany them.

The Emmaus road story helps to illuminate *Accompaniment, a theology of mission*. We see that mission is a journey, and that this journey, taken with many companions, shows us the unexpected and sometimes unrecognized Christ who walks with us. In this journey, as we break bread together, we move toward Christ's mission of reconciliation between us and God, between us and one another.

II. THE CONTEXT OF MISSION

When Jesus met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), he asked them, “What are you speaking of?” What would we say today about our reality as people of God? What is happening in the world?

WHAT IS OUR CONTEXT FOR MISSION?

If you had to describe the world today to someone, what would you say? What do you see? What is happening in your community? What is happening in the nation? What is happening in the world, both hopeful and challenging?



Just as the earliest disciples needed to know about what was happening in their world, so that they could discuss it together and understand God's call, so we need to know what is happening in ours, so that we can talk about it with our brothers and sisters in Christ. That's the only way that we can understand how God's mission applies to our global reality.

Throughout history mission has been many things, both positive and negative. Christians have constantly tried to understand what mission means, and how to undertake it, working to learn from mistakes and misapprehensions. In the past 80 years, and especially in the past 20, Christians have begun to talk more and more about the meaning of mission with those who once were seen only as "objects" of mission, the members of "younger churches" in Asia, Africa and Latin America. We've begun to see that all of God's people are called to think about the why and how of mission.

That's why our participation in God's mission requires us to think carefully about how we are going about it. So what might that look like? What does mission mean today? What are we called to today, in our world, which furthers God's mission of reconciliation?

What do you think "mission" might mean in our 21st century global world?

- Learning about economics, wealth and poverty
- Preaching to people who have never heard the gospel
- Traveling to learn about the realities of life for Christians in other cultures
- Supporting our country's commitment to foreign aid
- Simplifying our lives and struggling against materialism
- Witnessing to our faith to the people in our communities
- Converting people from other religions
- Working with people in other countries to strengthen our faith through shared projects
- Giving money or other resources for economic development
- Advocating for the rights and dignity of the poor and of immigrants in our communities
- Trying to become more ecologically conscious and aware of our impact on the earth
- Inviting people, especially from other cultures or economic groups, to visit our church or become part of our community
- What else? _____

From the gospel and the stories of our faith, we understand that God's mission is *reconciliation*. We, and all people, are broken before God. We are turned in on ourselves, away from God and others. We sow discord and dissension. We hurt one another and abuse the earth we have been given to care for. We are *alienated*, far from God and from one another.

Jesus came to *reconcile* us with God. God meets us in our brokenness, and restores our relationship with God and with one another. God desires our reconciliation with one another, so that we no longer exploit or hurt; and our reconciliation with the earth, so that we no longer abuse or waste. We continue to be imperfect, but we are constantly called back to God's mission of reconciliation.



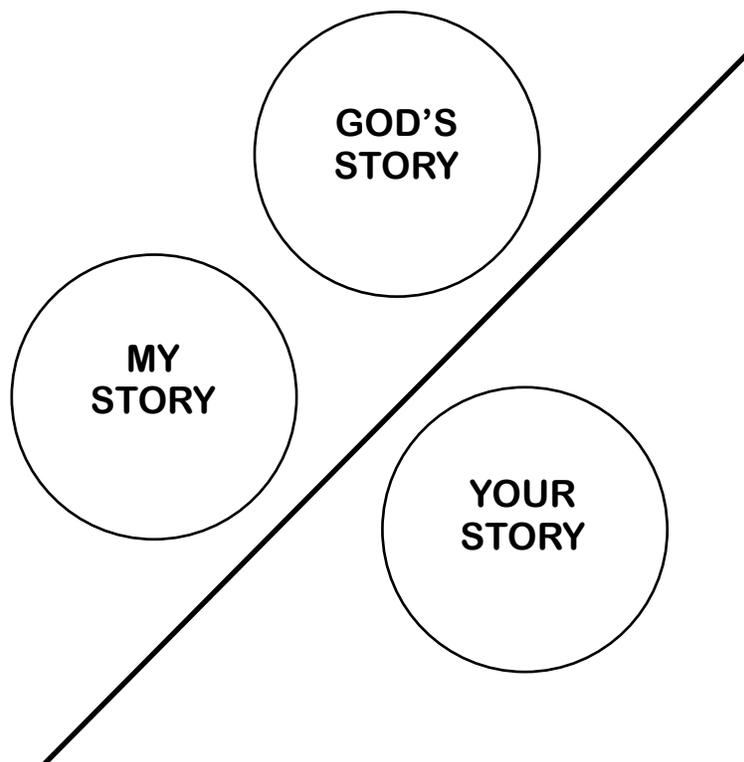
I give you a new command-ment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this every-one will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34–35).

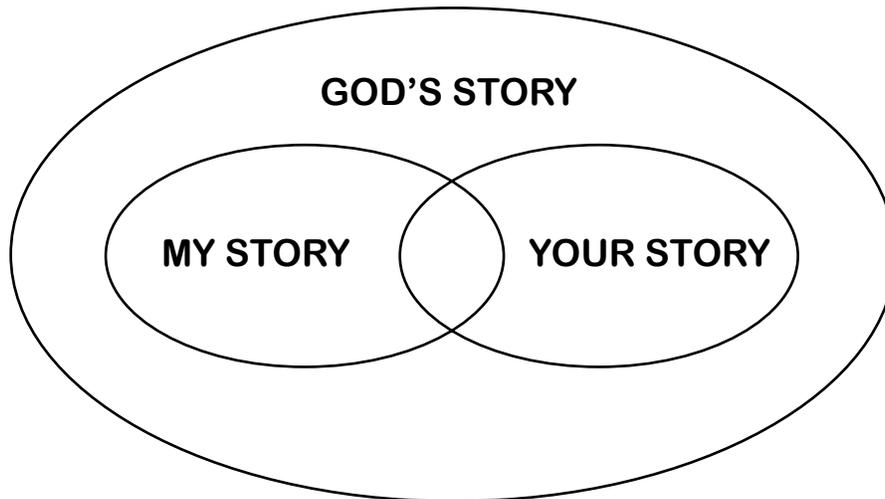
In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples three times to love one another. Love is a commandment; love is the way we follow him; love is the way we proclaim the gospel. Loving is not just about good feelings or good intentions. The way that Jesus actually loved us is not simply affection or kindness, but actually emptying himself in order to live with us as our friend and companion, and to stand for us before the powers that threaten our lives. That is the reconciling love which Jesus brings: that is the gospel we proclaim. Jesus’ reconciling love, which breaks down all barriers, calls us into mission through accompaniment.

III. ACCOMPANIMENT IN MISSION

“Accompaniment” is a scriptural and practical way of understanding mission that has been articulated in the past few decades in dialogue between churches in the “global North”—the churches who historically sent missionaries—and churches in the “global South”—churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America who historically received missionaries. Today, there are more Christians in the “global South” than in the “global North.” It’s a different world than that of the earliest missionaries, and our understanding of and living out mission must respond.

A lot of mission work historically looked like this: there is God’s story, my story and your story. Mission meant me bringing God’s story to you. God’s story is on my side, and you are on the other side. I’m crossing boundaries to bring God to you.





Accompaniment helps us see mission differently: In reconciliation, we realize that my story and your story are not divided by boundaries, but are both reconciled within God's story.

Because we live in the tension of already and not yet, between reconciliation and alienation from God, we continue to experience alienation from one another. We continue to experience, and to create, boundaries between ourselves and everything else. The categorization of what we encounter is unavoidable as we live in the world, but it can create boundaries between us and others.

Every day, we categorize according to boundaries, such as

- rich/middle class/working poor/destitute
- Black/White/Asian/Native American/mixed race
- high-school educated/college educated/illiterate
- Hindu/Atheist/Buddhist/Muslim/Christian
- human/animal/plant/mineral
- Lutheran/Episcopal/Catholic/Pentecostal

What boundaries do you see between the people around us, in our community and in our world? What other groups or categories can we name?

God's mission of reconciliation means that we learn to see others, not from our human point of view, but from God's point of view. Our old ways of seeing and relating have passed away. We learn to see and to repudiate all that lies between us and our brothers and sisters, valuing reconciliation and relationship above power and domination. In Christ, we no longer live as the world lives. In mission, we live out reconciliation. In Christ's reconciliation, we are all in relationship, all part of the body of Christ. We are not just called to love those who love us, who "get" us and understand us because we are very much alike. Rather we are called to love and be loved by those who are not like us, whom we might have to work quite hard to understand, or who may not understand us at all. God's reconciliation is across borders and boundaries. When we are trying to build bridges in our "already-not yet" reality, it takes a lot of grace.



From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:16–19).

The problem for us, as we live out Christ's mission of reconciliation, is that the boundaries between us are not innocent. They are just lines drawn in the sand; they are lines that mean something in our relationships and in how we treat one another. People who are placed in one kind of category might receive less, be able to do less and be treated less well than people in another category. The categories are not equal: they are expressions of inequality and often lead to injustice.

A simple way of putting this is to say that the categories are *asymmetrical* in terms of their power in society. Someone who is in one category may not have access to the same resources and rights that someone in another category will have. That lack of power can translate into a lack of freedom, a lack of health and a lack of security. The power of one category is huge. Power is not equal; it is asymmetrical, uneven.

Look again at the categories in the box on page 5. Where do you fall within these categories? When do you feel that you are on the "powerful" side? When do you feel that you are on the "less powerful" side? What does it mean to say that there are asymmetries of power in these categories?

Accompaniment helps us see the asymmetries of power in relationships. Because these asymmetries, just like the creation of boundaries and categories, seem natural to us, often we do not see them or think about them. Through accompaniment relationships we learn to see and think about asymmetries in order to live out Christ's reconciling mission, the reconciliation that has lifted up the lowly, and has broken down the walls between people.

IV. ACCOMPANIMENT VALUES

The story of Jesus and the disciples traveling to Emmaus reminds us that mission is a journey, and that it has a goal – living out Christ's reconciliation, breaking bread and forming community together. We reach that goal briefly, and then we begin the journey again, moving again towards reconciliation.

The mission journey does not end at a fixed point. Like the disciples, we might think we know where we are going, and where we plan to stop – but when the unrecognized Christ is revealed, our plans, and our journey, are transformed. We walk towards meeting Christ; we return to share what we have learned in that encounter.

In mission, our companions on the road may be individual people in our own community or entire churches in other countries. Engaging in mission through Accompaniment, we re-

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 4:27–28).



member that in order to proclaim the Gospel, we must place a high priority on relationship – that relationship which God has intended for us since the beginning of the world.

When we walk together, we need to be able to talk honestly, to share with one another, to get to know one another – to undo the boundary of strangeness or suspicion between us. It takes time, thought, and commitment to learn to see how we create boundaries, to perceive the asymmetries in our relationships, and to respond to them from Christ's reconciling mission.

People committed to being ambassadors of God's reconciling mission have discovered that certain values appear in the praxis of Accompaniment over and over again. These Accompaniment Values, help and support us as we celebrate, reflect, act, and examine our work in God world.

Mutuality In accompaniment, we work to build up our capacities to proclaim and live out the Gospel of Christ. We work to recognize that all of us have gifts to offer to God's mission, and to value gifts of all, while caring for one another's needs. Mutuality is built upon giving and receiving trust as we grow together.

1 Cor. 12: 12, 24-26. *We are one body, with many members, all interdependent upon one another in joy and suffering. How does this interdependence affect the way in which we relate to one another in Christ's reconciling mission?*

Inclusivity God calls us to include everyone in the mission of reconciliation, yet we know that all communities exclude someone. In accompanying one another, we look to see who is excluded, and why, and commit to change community structures and habits that can exclude people without any deliberate intention. For those who experience exclusion, as well as for those who are "inside," it takes great effort and courage to continue to attempt to build relationships across boundaries. Inclusivity requires self-reflection and honesty about our own communities and relationships.

Luke 10:25. *Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the one excluded, who has compassion on the other who has been injured. How does exclusion and inclusion affect our relationships and our communities as we engage in God's mission?*

Vulnerability Vulnerability and Empowerment taken together are an important key to accompaniment in God's mission. In our culture, vulnerability often seems to be weakness, but Jesus shows us that vulnerability – openness to relationship, giving up power – is God's way of redemption. We enter God's mission through vulnerability, just as Jesus became vulnerable to us and with us.

Empowerment As we accompany one another, we struggle to recognize and name power as it affects our relationships. When we recognize that relationships have asymmetries of power, and struggle to balance and correct those asymmetries, we are working to Empower ourselves and one another. Learning to let go of power – to become Vulnerable – is an act of empowerment, as is recognizing and standing up to power that hobbles people in their walk through life.

2 Cor 12:9. *The power of God is made perfect in weakness. What does this mean for us as we engage in God's mission through relationship?*

Sustainability

Often we imagine our relationships as simple and self-sustaining. In fact, relationships are complex, and connected to other relationships and commitments, and require much attention over time to sustain. The Accompaniment Value of Sustainability means that we recognize that any given relationship will require an intentional commitment of attention and time to build up all those who are involved. In a mission project context, sustainability means embedding the project or work in the community as a whole, so that the project doesn't depend only on one or two people, and can continue over time.

Luke 10:1; John 15:15, 20:21. *The Gospels are full of Jesus' work in creating a sustainable community of disciples, with leaders empowered to carry on his reconciling mission. How can we learn from Jesus' commitment to teach, walk with, and give responsibility to his disciples?*

V. ACCOMPANIMENT IN ACTION

St. Augustine wrote, "It is solved by walking." Accompaniment bears fruit when we truly walk the road together. The Accompaniment Values come into play when we have to make decisions, share resources, recognize expertise, tell stories, and build networks as we engage God's mission.

As North American Christians, we recognize that these are areas of life together in which asymmetries of power are often present – and therefore, in living out Christ's mission of reconciliation, we are called to pay special attention to them. When we are attempting to walk with Christ and our brothers and sisters in accompaniment, it is important to ask questions about how our work is shaped in each of these areas. Learning to ask the Questions about these areas of our work together helps us to engage Accompaniment in Mission more effectively and honestly.

Resource sharing

- **Resources include:** money, time, job and travel opportunities, access to decision-makers, family connections, housing and building facilities, expertise, legal status.
- **Some of the challenges:** In a situation where we are reaching out to the community beyond our church walls, we'll often have to think carefully about how to share resources, and to receive resources, with the people we meet in a way that respects the whole community, and doesn't lead to undermining relationships or self-sufficiency.
- **Resource sharing questions:** *Who makes the decisions about the resources? Who is not involved in the conversation? Are all the resources identified?*

Expertise recognizing

- **Expertise includes:** a special skill or advanced education, cooking and child care, knowledge of local situations and customs, political acumen, cultural and artistic gifts, "street smarts."
- **Some of the challenges:** Recognizing expertise is complex in relationships where power is unequal. Those with money and power are frequently acknowledged as experts, while those with other gifts go unrecognized and their expertise unused by the community.
- **Expertise recognizing questions:** *Whose expertise is sought out, valued, used, and paid for? Whose expertise is not being welcomed and valued?*

Storytelling

- **Storytelling includes:** sharing and listening to stories and experiences of others, with cameras, computers, journals, public-speaking, sermons, books, bulletins, and more.
- **Some of the challenges:** In relationships where power is unequal, our understanding of other people's stories is shaped by those who have access to the tools of the media – including the press, books, computers, and more. It is important to think about how our representations of others' stories might be shaped by our own cultural preconceptions. Are we representing other people in our stories as they themselves would see their own lives?
- **Storytelling questions:** *Who gets to tell the story? Who has access to the tools and platforms of storytelling? What stories are not told, and who is expected to be silent? Whose stories are valued and important, and whose stories are ignored?*

Network building

- **Network building includes:** meeting and making connections with people; creating connections over time and space which will help support a sustainable community; developing relationships between individuals, resource holders, and organizations.
- **Some of the challenges:** Everyone has a network, but not everyone's networks are equally powerful. It's important to consider connections to people, resources, and organizations as something to be shared with all members of the community, and strategically building bridges between less powerful and more powerful actors.
- **Network building questions:** *Who has contacts with powerful or wealthy organizations or people, and how do those contacts benefit those who hold them? How are those without such contacts disadvantaged? How can we develop connections that will benefit less powerful members of our community?*

Decision making

- **Decision making includes:** political legislation, congregational councils, committees, pastors, and individuals who hold power or resources.
- **Some of the challenges:** It's very typical in any organization for just a few powerful "insiders" to make the real decisions. It is a special problem for small organizations, where it becomes "just the way things are done." Many voices are unheard and unsought in this situation. Committing to transparency and negotiation, taking seriously the needs and suggestions of all who will be affected, can be a new situation for a community.
- **Decision making questions:** *Who is involved in the decision making process? Are there a few insiders who make the decisions? Who benefits from the decisions? What is the process, and can it be made more inclusive, open, and accountable to all?*

VI. ACCOMPANIMENT FORMATION

All of this does not come easily. Like so much in our spiritual lives, it requires commitment and discipline. Because we are broken, we need the help of God's Holy Spirit to continue to return again and again to God's reconciling mission. We work to develop the capacities within us to walk with our companions on the way, and to meet Christ on the road. It is the journey that transforms us, and it is on the journey that we recognize Christ.

We are formed for God's mission by challenging ourselves to grow cognitively, emotionally and spiritually. The areas listed below are particularly important in our formation of God's reconciling mission.

Prayer – We are accompanied by Christ on our journey. God is always there for us. A discipline of regular prayer engages us with God's presence and God's reconciling mission.

Empathy – As we grow in our compassion, in our ability to feel the pain and joy of our companions and of all those who share the earth with us, we move from pity to compassion, from compassion to empathy, and from empathy to radical solidarity with our brothers and sisters.

Asset-based thinking – We learn to see our companion and ourselves as people and organizations with many assets, gifts and strengths, and identify what these are. Acknowledging asymmetries of power in relationship, we work to recognize that what has been seen as negative can actually be positive, a strength and resource to contribute to God's mission of reconciliation.

Systems-based thinking – This process helps us perceive the connections and interdependencies between self and other, between groups of people, between people and the earth, recognizing asymmetries of power in relationship, and connecting the dots between our personal lives and systemic realities.

Hospitality – How can we move beyond a generic welcome to creating a space that our companions find truly welcoming, where their gifts are honored and expressed? Christ's mission of reconciliation is an intimate challenge to the way we live and to our fear of vulnerability.

Worship – As we worship together, we learn to accompany one another and to become more inclusive as we gather at God's table. The baptismal font reminds us of the source of our calling to God's mission. We are sent out in the ministry of reconciliation and love. We engage and celebrate the gifts of worship, prayer and music of all of our sisters and brothers.

Scripture – We learn about God's reconciling mission in the world, and what God has done for us as we read and study scripture together, hearing together the living word.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to you who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:14–18).

VII. CONCLUSION

We are walking down the road together, and we sit to share a meal with this neighbor and stranger who had joined us, rejoicing in our new hope and understanding. And then the stranger disappears, and we are left staring across the table at our companion. What do we do now?

Alone, there is little we can do. It is only with our companion, our fellow witness that we can go out into the world to share the good news.

In engaging God's reconciling mission through accompaniment, we work to equip ourselves and our companions for our call to share the good news and to serve our neighbors. It is easy to do, and there will always be very real challenges. But God invites us to the table, and then sends us go out with our companions to share and to serve. When we tire, our companions hold us up; when our faith is weak, our companions remind us of what we have seen and shared together. God gave us companions for this purpose. Together, we can continue to live out God's reconciliation.

Discussion questions:

1. What do you think accompaniment means as it regards your walk in God's reconciling mission?
2. Who are your companions on the road?
3. How will you develop your relationships with them?
4. What challenges do you anticipate, or have you already encountered?
5. Why do you think accompaniment values are challenging to live out?