

DANMISSION  N

Position paper:
Contextual Theology
for Faith and Social
Action

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Position paper: Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action

1. Introduction

This paper contains Danmission's position and definition of its work on Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action as outlined in Theme 1 in Danmission's programme strategy "Sustainable Existence, Peaceful Co-existence". Along with Theme 1, the programme strategy also outlines Theme 2 on Dialogue and Peacebuilding, and Theme 3 on Sustainable and Just Stewardship of Natural Resources. Embodied in all three is the crosscutting principle of human rights and gender equality. This position paper refers to and builds on the programme strategy and Danmission's Understanding of Mission, "There is hope, there is forgiveness, there is life". The position paper has been approved by the board and is primarily directed to the staff and partners of Danmission to support a common understanding of Danmission's thematic areas and approaches. Furthermore, the position paper is directed to donors and potential donors.

2. Why Danmission works with Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action.

“Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the Church.” (1 Cor 14: 9-12)

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1: 14)

Danmission’s understanding of mission highlights the following: “that as a mission organization it is our task to meet the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in **word and deed**. We therefore base our work on the belief that there is hope, there is forgiveness, and there is life. Danmission aims to understand the changing times and needs across the world and to adapt to them in accordance with our foundation and our task. Danmission’s purpose as established in our mission statement is “to participate in the mission of preaching to and serving all the peoples of the earth to which Jesus Christ calls his Church”. This purpose is interpreted in the light of current, contextual, and relevant theology. Our task in Danmission is therefore to bring hope to the world in **word and deed**; we do this in cooperation with local churches and partners.”

Churches and organizations must therefore engage in contextual understanding and discernment to contribute incarnationally to their congregations and communities. The relevance of a church’s proclamation depends upon this ability to contextualize its theology. In accordance Danmission works toward connecting theological reflection with faith and social action. To this aim we support the work of churches, faculties, and organizations to engage in a contextual theology that combines theological reflection, faith, and social action. An awareness of carrying a degree of foreignness has accompanied international missions throughout the modern global missionary movement. The ecclesial and cultural heritages of modern Western Christianity have often proved a hindrance for what the missionaries tried to achieve. This realization led to an increased focus on adaptation and presentation of the gospel in forms which could be intelligible to local contexts. Many churches in Asia, Africa, and The Middle East are formed and shaped by Western European theological thinking as well as their own traditional thinking. Danmission wishes to support those churches that seek to address their current contextual issues in congregations and civil society with theological responses and reflection.

As an organization based in a protestant Lutheran church, Danmission holds the belief that it is the local church and its theological institutions that have the authority to interpret the Bible and put word and deed to the gospel in their contexts. We acknowledge and work with churches and other Christian institutions that hold different theological views from our own.

Another reason for focusing on a contextual theological approach is that when churches act as agents of change, they do so because of their theological convictions in their encounter with their surroundings. An indication of churches becoming change agents is their ability to listen, understand, and act according to the needs of their congregations and their surroundings. Listening and understanding inform the sociological analysis of context as well as the theological re-reading of the Christian tradition and the planning of transformative action. In short, this is the contextual theological approach.

Churches and theological thinkers can then provide words and deeds that strengthen faith, hope, and resilience in congregations and their contexts, especially where tragedy and hopelessness prevail.

The churches and communities where Danmission's partners work are part of civil society. In many countries this is under pressure from oppressive systems and structures that prohibit the freedom of assembly and association and freedom of religion and belief, thus contributing to a shrinking space for civil society. In societies ridden by conflict and poverty, churches often play an important role in reaching out to the marginalized and poor, trying to uphold human dignity for all. However, democratic structures and values are weak, which in turn affects the way people relate to each other. Distrust and lack of meaningful inclusive fellowships, lack of safe spaces for free expression, and a lack of sense of contributing responsibly to society, are common. This also affects churches, congregations, Christian institutions, and organizations in their internal structures and fellowship as well as in their ongoing ability to adapt and be inclusive in their Christian faith and fellow-feeling.

In the light of this, Danmission views a contextual theological approach to be theologically fundamental and sociologically fruitful in holding together word and deed, and proclamation and diakonia, which together qualify mission as Christian.

3. What is Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action in Danmission?

Danmission's programme strategy outlines two intervention areas for its work on Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action:

- Strengthening theological centres to be catalysts for faith and social action.
- Promoting freedom of religion and belief, assembly and association and strengthening civil society.

The two intervention areas are interlinked, and each is also linked to Theme 2, "Dialogue and Peacebuilding" and Theme 3, "Sustainable and Just Stewardship of Natural Resources". Although each intervention area has its specific focus, Danmission's work on Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action will often focus on more than one intervention area and link with other thematic areas. There is a theological foundation for all the three themes and projects supported by Danmission.

We experience our world because we are part of it. For our faith to have meaning it must be meaningful in a particular historical, cultural, and social context. It is vital that we are always learning to make connections between the faith and theology that have been received and handed down and the issues and dilemmas that we need to address as we seek to contribute to diaconal transformation. Contextual theology uses principles from the Bible but filters them through the lens of contemporary reference points. In forming a contextual theological approach we must consider linguistic, geo-political, socio-economic, cultural, and ideological factors. Being Christian in one culture and context may look somewhat different from being Christian in another.

Contextual theology can be described on the one hand as digging into the treasure troves of faith for the betterment of society in the here and now, and on the other hand digging into the context to understand the challenges and dilemmas that need theological reflection and practical spiritual response.

One could argue that all theology is contextual, since all theology is formed by its context at any given time and place. In Danmission's history, theology and Christianity have been taught and preached by missionaries who were formed and shaped by a Danish/European Lutheran context. Many of our partners have thus been shaped and formed by Western theology. Danmission wishes to support our partners, churches, and theological faculties in reflecting theologically on their own context, thus creating theological responses to the relevant local issues. Contextual theological reflection and response have the power to motivate and inspire faith and social action. Word and

deed are then interlinked and contribute to change-making, as well as to faith and congregational life. Contextual theology is an approach and method where curiosity or a sense of wonder is crucial to the work of listening to the context. Faith calls us to move beyond our comfort zone, to see and hear people and perspectives different from our own. As we wonder and wrestle with the questions that challenge our status quo, we deepen our own understanding and faith and listen more carefully to others. Such theological reflection based on a deeper understanding provides a better contextual response and thus more hope in the public sphere and in individual congregations. A theology of today shapes the churches and societies of tomorrow, both locally and globally in an increasingly interconnected world.

The programme strategy of Danmission states that, “Religious groups and religiously engaged actors often play a crucial role in making change happen – in reaching out to “the other”. They are engaged in society and recognized as important actors who can inspire hope and work for societal change, peace, justice, and a healthy relationship to resources and to nature. Churches and other religious institutions are often among the main providers of basic services such as health and education and they constitute the prime social network of many people across the globe.

Religion is often the source of spiritual strength. Humans are spiritual beings. When the world changes rapidly and sometimes violently, religion is often the source for consolation, hope, strength, and trust that things can improve, that a new world is possible – and strength to join forces for action. And sometimes faith remains as one of the prime sources of resilience. Theology and faith can be emancipatory and help people to connect with each other and with God.”

Considering the immense challenges we are facing in the world, Danmission will have a specific interest, though is not limited to, the following theologies.

Definitions of theologies relevant to Danmission and partners

Contextual theology can be defined as approaches and methods for listening and understanding, utilizing a sociological analysis of context, a theological re-reading of the Christian tradition, and the planning of transformative action.

The contextual challenges of Danmission’s partner-countries differ and so what is addressed may differ from country to country. Each church, theological faculty, and theological thinker must explore and define the current contextual challenges in each their own context. This means that the content of contextual theology varies from country to country. However, contextual theology implies a strong focus on **approaches and methods**, to connect context to theological reflection. Approaches are often multidisciplinary, and include the sociological, geo-political, socio-economic,

psycho-social, and the theological, where reciprocal loops of listening, reading, and reflection between and among thinkers and do'ers are essential. These loops can start from a top-down thinker's perspective or from a bottom-up social actor's perspective, or be a mix of the two.

In many contexts there is a public space where people act and live together, a space defined for all and where authorities are responsible for the common good. However, in many places, the common good is only a dream. In oppressive societies, the common public space is either very small or the governments and state actors are not primarily focused on the common good. **Public theology** addresses challenges that affect the common good. The messaging of public theology often takes the form of a priest or pastor criticizing authorities for not safeguarding common spaces as good for all, whether it be lack of healthcare, security, or freedom. Public theological response is a **role** the church or religious leader takes on in the public sphere for the benefit of all. Contextual theology, public theology and practical theology are often interlinked.

Liberation theology often addresses the uneven and unfair power structures in a society and calls for liberation and freedom from poverty and oppression. This theology is truly a theology from the bottom, from vulnerable, marginalized, and poor people demanding more justice and equality. Liberation theologies from South America, South Africa, Palestine, and the Dalit theology of India have all contributed to a strong awareness of the injustice that people have suffered and have motivated people to hope and act for justice and freedom. Some of Danmission's partner-countries suffer from oppressive power structures, injustice, and many human rights violations.

Theology of religions relates to how from a Christian point of view we can relate to the "religious other". This means our neighbour in our context and public space, and is important for building peaceful communities. This theology is relevant to Danmission's work with interfaith dialogue under Theme 2; see more on this in the Theme 2 position paper. Theology of Religions basically defines three main approaches: the exclusivist, the inclusivist, and the pluralist. Depending on the approach, it will define the type and agenda of interfaith dialogue. Theology of religions is also closely linked to **missiology and ecumenism** as all three deal with how we relate to the "Christian other" or the "Religious other".

Under Theme 3 **Ecotheology** is relevant, as it deals with how humans and nature interact and are linked to each other. This is described in the Theme 3 position paper.

In all our activities at Danmission we work from a Christian foundation. We view it as beneficial to work with a Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) and Gender Equality, as cross-cutting support of Danmission's programmatic work. It is therefore relevant to

engage in theological thinking regarding Human Rights and Gender Equality, as well as including theological insights and depths into a rights-based approach. The document formulated by the World Council of Churches, “Called to transformation – ecumenical diakonia”, states that, “Faith gives both depth and passion to human rights. The depth and the passion find its expression in theological integrity, in spiritual depth, and in moral force, that purely secular approaches may lack. Human rights sharpen the eyes of faith, so that the structural scope of the needs of the world are seen. Human rights help to frame diaconal work that achieves lasting change for the better.” Danmission therefore sees a Christian foundation with a rights-based approach as mutually reinforcing and strengthening each other.

One of the Human Rights that Danmission pays special attention to is Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB). Many places in the world religious minorities are under increasing pressure and their rights are being violated. This is seen in connection with an increasingly shrinking space for civil society and a lack of Freedom of Assembly and Association. Churches and other civil society organizations’ ability to work in societies is becoming increasingly difficult as more and more countries are experiencing conflict or a decline in democratic structures and values. This environment makes it necessary to support religious minorities and their rightful place in society, among others through a democratic formation of especially the youth. Realizing civil and religious rights and the correspondence between proclamation of freedom in Christ and societal forms will allow both individual and social dimensions of this freedom.

4. Danmission's aim

This section will delineate the two intervention areas and provide examples of activities. As Danmission works in countries with different contexts, the examples may only be applicable in certain contexts.

The first intervention area, "Strengthening theological centres to be catalysts for faith and social action," is based on the understanding that theological reflection can motivate and inspire people to have faith, hope, and to act. Contextual theological thinking closely related to the context may be lacking, but the intervention has the empowering quality of inspiring people because it can motivate to act and form spiritual paths forward for people who have lost meaning and hope.

Danmission will:

- Support and strengthen Christian theological centres - educational institutions - to secure high-quality theological education for future preachers, teachers, and other actors in dialogue and diaconia to be catalysts for learning, reflection, and action in their societies.
- Support contextual and public theology development and language, which answers to needs, hopes, and voices of people in local contexts, and motivate them to take action.
- Support places which enable groups of people to reflect in order to counter dehumanizing forces and voices and to take part in the development of their contexts for the benefit of their societies.
- Support socially engaged Christian actors in the translation of theology into action and strengthen churches and other local faith communities to take part in and contribute to society.

Examples of activities:

- Increase capacity of theological educational institutions and seminaries partnering churches to engage in contextual theology, public theology, liberation theology, and theology of religions.
- Develop curricula of contextual theology in theological faculties and seminaries partnering churches and partners.
- Offer theological thesis scholarships or fellowships for students and theologians who are interested in one of Danmission's themes.

- Explore options for theological exchange programs between Denmark and Danmission’s partner countries and between partner countries.
- Hold regional and international meetings between theological/church actors in Asia, East Africa and the Middle East to share expert knowledge and experience of contextual theology approaches, methods, and issues.
- Empower theological fora and reflection groups to delve into theological reflection based on an understanding of the context, addressing current contextual social justice issues, and linking to civil society, the public space where social justice challenges need theological attention and response.
- Conduct contextual theology seminars and conferences where current contextual social justice issues are reflected on from a theological point of view.
- Support theological development, research, training, discussion, publications, and dialogues with civil society.
- Encourage links and cooperation to be formed between theological institutions/faculties/seminaries and social actors/civil society.
- Form and sustain links and relationships between theological institutions/faculties/seminaries and church leadership and congregations.

The second intervention area, “Promoting freedom of religion and belief, assembly & association, and strengthening civil society” is based on the understanding that in places where democracy is declining, there is a shrinking space in civil society, and oppressive structures limit civil and religious freedom.

Danmission will:

- Support the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief for people to enjoy the right to think freely, hold positions, and share ideas, including the freedom not to have a religion. This includes people of faith or no faith, among others indigenous groups. It also relates to publicly practicing and manifesting one’s spirituality and religion – hereunder the right to assemble and act together. A special focus is on people living in poverty and on discriminated and vulnerable groups.
- Encourage democratic formation for peaceful pluralism and inclusive citizenship. This includes facilitating safe-spaces and supporting networks for community change agents across religious, ethnic, social, professional, and other groups.

- Strengthen local civil society actors, and promote joint action among change agents (civil society organisations and individuals) for social justice, active citizenship, and community building.
- Promote community organizing, community dialogue, and joint action.
- Protect and support freedom of assembly and association for all – and promote a free space to engage actively in civil society, hereunder promoting equal rights and diversity for local and civil society actors with a focus on vulnerable groups.

Examples of activities:

- Awareness training of FoRB rights among religious minorities and Indigenous peoples.
- As a Christian organization we wish to support our brothers and sisters in Christ when they face persecution, just as we wish to support other religious minorities facing persecution.
- Theological reflection groups on FoRB to enhance the understanding of FoRB rights of both Christians and other religious groups.
- Curricula development of FoRB in theological faculties and training of future pastors in FoRB.
- Active participation in FoRB networks and cooperation with Nordic partners working in the global south through the NORFoRB network.
- Support the forming of local and regional FoRB networks.
- Diversity and FoRB training among religious groups that enhance an acceptance and tolerance of religious diversity.
- Address personal status laws in countries that undermine women’s religious rights.
- Engage and educate law students on FoRB.
- Democratic citizenship training of teachers and youth.
- Explore regional and international exchange programs focusing on democratic formation.
- Engage in networks relating to shrinking space and civil and religious freedom issues, where Danmission and partners can contribute and learn.

- Support partners' efforts in conducting advocacy and campaigns in their fight for more freedom.
- Support targeted research and baseline studies that measure levels of discrimination and oppression.

5. How Danmission works with Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action

Danmission works in partnerships with shared goals related to Contextual Theology for Faith and Social Action. Danmission takes an active role with its partners on capacity building and cooperation. Danmission prioritizes strong in-house skills related to contextual theology for faith and social action at HQ and at country/regional offices. Sometimes the nature of the work related to the forming of fora and networks may require that Danmission takes a role to facilitate or implement directly. Danmission also engages with theological networks and programmatic cooperation in national, regional and global networks to learn, to be updated on relevant thematic issues, and to leverage joint influence and programmatic development of the field with like-minded actors.

To successfully implement its Programme Strategy, Danmission aims to build its programmatic capacity and expertise at the Danmission headquarters and country/regional offices in the coming years. Danmission has formed a global team for its staff to enhance capacity, mutual learning, and cross-country collaboration.

Danmission is rooted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark and sees itself as the Church's mission and development organisation in the global south. Although it

The added value of Danmission's ...

Local leadership approach:

- Danmission works with local partners based on mutual respect and shared goals.
- Through local offices in programme countries Danmission navigates directly in the contexts and works closely with its partners.

Faith-based approach:

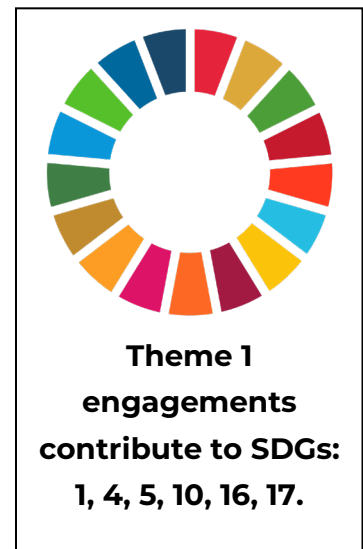
- According to World Population Review about 85% of the world's population identify with a faith. In this context Danmission and its faith-based partners benefit from a broad outreach to large parts of communities through faith-based institutions and actors.
- Danmission and its faith-based partners can sometimes navigate more freely in challenged contexts than other civil society actors.
- Danmission gains trust from both faith-based (of different faith) and non-faith-based actors, which places Danmission in a unique position to facilitate safe spaces across divides.

springs from a Lutheran protestant background, Danmission thinks and acts ecumenically, thus underlining an inclusive theology and practice.

The inclusive theology and practice shapes Danmission's approach to working with for example contextual theology, FoRB, and civil society. Although shaped by protestant Lutheran theology Danmission is inspired and enriched by ecumenical theology and ecumenical cooperation. Persecution of Christians is a concern for Danmission, whose inclusive approach is a "FoRB for all", where freedom for all benefits Christians more than only focusing on freedom for some. However, Danmission works with Christian partners whose point of departure is similar to Danmission's Christian values and point of departure. Likewise, Christian Churches and institutions are a part of the civil society with whom Danmission works. Oppression and shrinking civil space affect all. Initiatives to create more freedom, open space, and democratic structures will benefit all, even though Danmission works with and takes a point of departure in Christian partners.

6. HRBA/Gender and Theme 1: Contextual Theology for faith and social action

The link between human rights, gender equality, and Theme 1 lies in the mutuality and reciprocity between human rights and faith. Through contextualising theology, Danmission and its partners strengthen faith, hope, and resilience by addressing the human rights challenges that the local communities experience. The challenges that people face are multifaceted and complex, involving their civil and political rights, and economic, social, and cultural rights. Under Theme 1 and within the human rights work, Danmission has a focus on civil and political rights, emphasising the right to freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of assembly and association. Apart from civil and political rights, a long range of economic, social, and cultural rights are of importance for Theme 1.



Crosscutting human rights and gender equality in Theme 1 supports:

Activities:

- Exploring and developing a theological view of human rights and gender equality in Danmission, involving other Christian organisations and Human Rights experts.
- Women, Religion and Human Rights in Lebanon addressing personal status laws in Lebanon that undermine women's rights.
- Together with partners developing good outputs, activities, and outcomes in relevant projects that include and explore gender roles, relationships, and spheres of influence.
- Create discussion and learning spaces between partners and Danmission that address the relationship between theology and Human Rights/Gender equality.

7. Examples of work

The Contextual Theological Forum of Lebanon:

The Theological Forum brings together Lebanese Christian *thinkers and do'ers* for Christian reflection, mutual learning, and practical cooperation. This is in a context where religious leaders enjoy more trust from the population than from their politicians and generally have a **wider** reach and greater influence over society. The Theological Forum creates an active and innovative space by convening meetings, facilitating new and innovative cooperations, supporting resulting activities for social cohesion, publications, and other learning exercises (listening-dialogue round tables, conferences) and innovative formats such as thematic hack-a-thons and other modalities adapted from different fields. The project enables and builds up change-makers from practice and academy, benefits their wider communities (churches, universities, and bordering communities), and allows Danmission to learn and grow alongside through facilitation and participation in this highly localised learning and practice endeavour.

Approved by the board of Danmission, August 2023.