Session 07.01 - The present: what is passing

Lab: Mission Paradigms · Hope Lab 1 — The present: what is passing
Date: 6 October 2026
Facilitator: Jan Wessels (with Ruth Wall - WEA Mission Commission)
Approximate number of participants: 34

1. Purpose of today's session

What should today's session achieve?

- Open the Mission Paradigms series by looking honestly at the present — the dominant pattern of mission in Europe — and naming what in it is fading.
- Test inherited assumptions against today's realities: secularisation, multicultural and religious plurality, financial pressure, and Europe's fading confidence as a historic sending centre.
- Do honest ground-clearing, without defensiveness or despair, so the sessions that follow have something truthful to build on.

2. Starting point

What question, input or previous result did the group begin with?

- The overarching question of the series: what is faithful, hopeful evangelical witness in a Europe where Christianity is losing its cultural default and evangelicals are a minority within that minority — without becoming either a chaplaincy for cultural fear or a denial of real loss?
- Input from Ruth Wall (WEA Mission Commission), drawing on Jay Mātenga's 2026 forecast: the contrast between utilitarianism and mutuality.
- A table-based breakout and report-back on what, in our inherited pattern of mission, no longer fits.

3. Key insights

- Mutuality is the central counterpoint: utilitarian thinking reduces people to outcomes, productivity and measurable impact; mission needs mutuality, relational reciprocity, and the wellbeing of people and place.
- Europe is not one story: Western and Eastern Europe are on different trajectories; secularisation, majority-Christian identity, sending patterns and post-Soviet church growth vary sharply across the continent.

- Inherited mission patterns no longer fit: the decline of West-to-rest instincts, institutional self-preservation, number-driven measures of success, and funding models built for an earlier era.
- Grief is real but unevenly timed: transition is a grief process, not synchronised across churches, denominations or movements — some ready to innovate, others still processing loss.
- New mission imagination is emerging alongside loss: mutual learning with diaspora communities, more localised ownership of mission, and broader participation beyond specialist missionaries.

4. Challenges identified

- Europe's mission confidence is under strain — post-colonial critique, cultural and religious plurality, economic pressure, war, nationalism, AI disruption and climate instability, all making the church more inward-looking.
- Belonging is fragmenting — weaker attachment to denominations, local congregations and inherited church families, especially among younger people who move freely across communities, online spaces and informal networks.
- Mission structures are absorbing displaced young leaders — younger, mission-minded Christians underused by their local churches find a home in mission organisations that function as substitute church communities (noted by Timo).
- Digital influence is reshaping formation — pastoral influence now competes with social media, short-form content, influencers and AI-assisted learning, alongside shallower reading habits and a more complex task of discipleship.
- Younger generations carry less inherited memory and less hope — they do not experience the same loss as older leaders, and one participant warned of unusually low optimism among younger people in Germany.

5. Ideas and possible solutions

- Reorient from productivity-first instincts toward mutuality, reciprocity and local flourishing held together with global connectedness.
- Hold together local witness and cross-cultural calling, rather than choosing one over the other.
- Localise ownership of mission and broaden participation beyond specialist missionaries.
- Pursue mutual learning with the diaspora communities already present in Europe.
- Extend empathy across the unevenly-timed grief, so that churches ready to innovate and those still processing loss can still work together.

6. Examples, projects and useful resources

- Organisation / project: WEA Mission Commission — Leader's Forecast (Jay Mātenga, 2026)
    - What can be learned: "Utilitarianism rising" as a threat to mission; the Industrial-vs-Indigenous schema and the call from output toward mutuality.
    - Contact or link: weamc.global · jaymatenga.com
- Organisation / project: Three Horizons framework (Bill Sharpe / International Futures Forum)
    - What can be learned: A simple way to hold decline and emergence together — H1 present, H3 emerging, H2 the contested middle.
    - Contact or link: Triarchy Press, 2013 (2nd ed. 2020)
- Organisation / project: Diaspora and migrant-led congregations in Europe
    - What can be learned: Partners for mutual learning and more locally-owned mission — signs of the new imagination emerging alongside loss.
    - Contact or link: Via EEA / MissieNederland

7. Opportunities for European collaboration

- Peer learning across Western and Eastern Europe on their diverging trajectories.
- Shared, honest work on funding and sustainability models fit for the new era.
- Mutual-learning partnerships with diaspora communities already present on the continent.
- Intergenerational collaboration that takes younger leaders' lower inherited memory and hope seriously.

8. Decisions and points of agreement

These are the shared convictions that emerged.

- Europe is experiencing an uneven transition, not a single story.
- The moment calls for adaptive rethinking of mission, not defensive maintenance of inherited structures.
- Mutuality, not utilitarian output, should shape mission.
- The session should stay in honest reflection rather than rushing to solutions.

9. Open questions or different perspectives

- How do we fund and sustain mission when the models built for an earlier era no longer fit?
- How do we hold together churches ready to innovate and those still grieving what is lost?
- What forms of belonging and discipleship fit a fragmenting, digitally-shaped generation?
- How should the church respond to AI's disruption of formation and of what it means to be human?

10. Three key takeaways

- From utilitarianism to mutuality — mission measured by relationship and flourishing, not output.
- Europe is not one story — the transition is uneven across regions, generations and institutions.
- Grief and hope sit together — real loss is unevenly timed, yet new mission imagination is already emerging.

11. Message to the wider HOPE community

As a HOPE Lab, we believe that *the renewal of mission in Europe begins with honesty — naming what is passing without defensiveness or despair — and with a turn from measuring people by output toward mutuality, so that even in real grief we can see the new imagination God is already raising up.*

12. Handover to the next session

What should the next session build on?

HopeLab 2 (the emerging future) builds on this honest naming of what is fading by turning to what is being born — where the polyphonic, many-voiced church is already visible, with diaspora and migrant-led communities as signs of what is coming.