

MISSION TO THE NORTH: OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

Input at Edinburgh 2010 by Fidon R. Mwombeki

Edinburgh 1910 was a milestone, of course. Most countries in the world had been colonized by Europeans. Missions took advantage of colonization to spread the gospel and the culture. That international conference was certainly mainly of Europeans and Americans trying to strategize how they would preach the gospel and convert the whole world to the Christian faith as quickly as possible. Christian and non-Christian worlds were clearly distinguished.

A generation later the reality was different. The “mission fields” had become “churches” and understood the need to further the gospel under their own initiative and management. After all, even under the leadership of “missionaries” the main actors of mission had always been the native people. Without their participation, no missionary was successful. They taught the missionaries the language, they showed them what to do, they accompanied them, they gave them food and plots of land to build churches, and built churches by their own hands.

THE CHANGE IN THEOLOGY OF MISSION IN THE NORTH

The independence of the strong churches in the South forced the North to reconsider their theology of mission and their own role. The discussions in the IMC, CWME and WCC had to respond to the independence and newly-acquired self determination of the Southern churches. The dominance of anyone in mission work was not wanted and should not be tolerated.

The development in missiological thinking can be observed through a look into the themes of the International Mission Conferences. At Edinburgh 1910, at the peak of colonization Christians were optimistic of “evangelization of the world in this century.” At Jerusalem 1928 the mood was somber with the reality that other religions were not going to go away so fast. In the shadow of fascism in Europe (Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Japan) in Tambaram 1938 the strength of the Southern (younger) churches was felt, with more representatives than those from the north. At Whitby 1947 the Northern missions were suffering from the aftermath of WWII and had discovered their limits. It was no longer possible to defend the notion of Europe as a “Christian” and superior continent. New mission theology was developing with the concept of “partnership” at the centre. Many churches began to negotiate independence from missions. At Willingen 1952 a theological foundation was laid that has shaped Missiology ever since: *Missio Dei*. Not the church, not the missions, not the people are indeed actors in mission. It is God! After New Delhi 1961 brought together IMC and WCC, the influence of missions in the churches would probably be felt. After this, missions in the North began slow processes of working closer with the churches at home, the idea of “supporting churches” (*Trägerkirchen*) getting a base. However, in my view with the end of IMC, the global church had lost a significant impetus in mission. The Council for World Mission and Evangelism that was formed instead never filled the position of the IMC as it lacked the necessary independence from church structures.

In 1963 Mexico-City CWME discussed in detail the concept of “mission in six continents”. It was acknowledged that indeed all continents are mission fields. Statements were made that there is no church that is too poor to contribute in God’s

mission and there is no church that does not need others. This was to continue at Bangkok 1972 where apart from the formulation of holistic approach to mission, it is remarkable for discussion of just relations between churches. The other following conferences continued in the same spirit, but the agenda from the South could no longer be peripheral. World Mission started to be understood theologically as really global, though.

CHANGING STRUCTURES TO MATCH THEOLOGY

Throughout these periods, the question of structures of churches and missions were being discussed. Mission must be done ecumenically, and in all six continents. There was a good discussion at the Saint Antonio Conference about the need to have new structures that make it possible for the churches globally to share their joys and tears, their gifts and their needs. In 1972 the former Paris Mission decided to restructure to reflect this theological understanding. It became CEVAA (Communauté Evangélique d'Action Apostolique), a community of 48 churches in 16 countries in three continents. Later in 1977 Council for World Mission (CWM) was formed out of the former London Missionary Society into a community of 30 churches in five continents. Then in 1996 my own organization, United Evangelical Mission became a joint mission of 33 churches from Asia (15), Africa (12) and Germany (6) together with a diaconic institution Bethel. In our Statement on Corporate Identity we explain:

How do we work together?

Two are better than one, because they have a better reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (Ecclesiastes 4: 9)

Our members from Africa, Asia and Germany have equal rights in governance. Our decision makers –women, men and young adults– come from all three

continents. All decisions about our work are taken on the basis of our common rules and regulations and our joint budget.

We manage the resources entrusted to us transparently and conscientiously and account for them together in faithful stewardship. In working and living together we learn from each other and are willing to be transformed and renewed as we experience that our partaking in God's mission also changes our lives and our work.

THE PRESENT CHALLENGES

I would say the structure has proven to work. The members of UEM, CWM and CEVAA cherish the communion among themselves as an example of living ecumenism. The communities are small enough that they can know each other and work together in trust than in larger global ecumenical settings. UEM especially is indeed ecumenical—with Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Reformed, United all accepting each other and sharing ministry with each other even before the controversies are internationally resolved.

Very significant in these communions is the exchange of co-workers or missionaries in all directions: North-South, South- North and South-South to serve as missionaries. In this exchange, I would like to highlight the challenges faced by the South-North missionaries.

First, the old convictions are not easy to get rid of. Many in the North still think their continent is not a mission field. It is Christian already with a few intruders of other religions. They do not understand the idea of a missionary coming from the South to serve in the North. For them mission is done by giving money to some mission organization which does it on their behalf. And there are still too many people who

regard mission as helping the poor, and therefore the people from the South have no mission in the North—no poor people they are in position to help. Therefore they are not missionaries. Instead they come to “learn” something from the developed people which they should use for their benefit and their people when they go back home. On the other hand, it is difficult for those who have regarded mission as “receiving” to accept that they are givers as well. They do not have something tangible like medicine or books to give to the Northerners anyway. They do not come with cash but they are paid with finances from the North. How could that be mission?

Second, in the sharing, it has been complicated for the North to say explicitly what they need from their Southern colleagues. The Southern churches many times know what they want from their Northern colleagues, most of the time in material or financial terms. They keep asking their colleagues to say what they need from the South, and that is a difficult question. Certainly exotic drumming and dancing is not enough. Some talk of “spirituality” which is not easy to define. In UEM however, we are experiencing churches in Germany define precisely what specific expertise and competences they want the coworkers from the South to bring.

Third, secularism is a challenge. A secularized culture of the North does not regard mission and religion as such as important for anyone at all. Liberal theology has not helped either. It is getting increasingly accepted that all religions are just the same and therefore there is no need to do Christian mission. Religion is simply an aspect of life and therefore free choice is necessary. We do not need even to educate our children in the Christian faith. They shall choose for themselves whenever they want. I have to

say, after the shock of fundamentalistic religions, many people are making a new look at the need for mission in the North (e.g. German President Köhler in May 2010).

Fourth, it is very difficult for anyone to break into the closed society of the North. It is particularly difficult for missionaries from the South, as foreigners, to penetrate the society. One of our coworkers in Germany told me of her shock as she read in the papers about the death of a member of the congregation. The widow of the fellow published a death announcement in that small village. The announcement ended with a note: "Please, no visits".

Sixth, stigma against foreigners is high. Foreigners in the North are generally stigmatized. They are not welcome. The most frequent question one hears from the native people when they get to know one is, "when are you going back home?" The missionaries from the South are regarded as beggars and their gifts are not easily appreciated at the beginning. Most people in the North do not believe Southerners have a message to tell them, but that they are somehow trying to take advantage of the system to get access to wealth and services in the North. They are regarded as "economic migrants" only. That means even those who feel indeed called to do mission, are stigmatized. That makes it more difficult for them to penetrate the society.

OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenges, I am encouraged by some opportunities that I can see. First, there is real hunger for the gospel in the North. The churches members want to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have talked to many people in the mainline churches who

complain about too much academic and abstract sermons from their own pastors, most of whom are employed until retirement, however good or bad preachers they may be. I often hear the lay people say that most of the sermons have nothing to do with their daily lives or their real concerns. They are full of ideas and explanation of theological theories. People want to hear about Jesus. They want to know God is with them. They want to know about the forgiveness of sins. They want to be able to talk to their children about their faith. They want to learn how to pray. And these are the things people from the South are used to do and can share if they have a chance. A growing interest in the mainline churches in such real basic Christian matters is also very much welcome.

I have to say that I see the churches in Germany officially being very serious about mission from the South. They are willing to hear and be enriched by the gifts of the people from the South. For me it is clear through my election into the highest governing council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, which is a sign of trust that someone like me can, and is invited to, contribute the gifts and experience in the church life in Germany. There can be no bigger sign of trust of people like me.

Second, the reality of "Mission from the South" is settling in Europe through a variety of independent missionaries who are founding churches in Europe. It is a great phenomenon, and according to Claudia Währisch-Oblau, it is a factor to reckon with. These churches from the South are coming independent of the structures of the churches in the North and establishing churches. They do start with the people from their own countries who are migrants, but they are slowly getting a footing in Europe with not a few European members and interested people. The European official churches

have not yet known how to deal with this phenomenon. These missionaries solve the problem of finances by somehow getting access to the finances in Europe.

These migrant churches may play a role the Jewish congregations played in the early church. We read in the book of Acts that the apostles in every city always started their mission in the Synagogues. There they were welcome, even though their message was not easy to get through. But from the Synagogues they moved to a wider society. Is it not possible to believe that these hundreds of migrant churches, though starting with their own kind, shall in some way break into the wider society? I hope God will use them to do exactly that, and that indeed God will assist the churches in the North to find ways to intergrate them into their own churches and communities.