

Mission and Power - A comment from Germany

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I come from the global North. I am white, academic, 53 years old. I am ordained and worst: I am male. Measured against the ecumenical arithmetics I am politically incorrect. As Ruth Padilla has put it: “The face of mission and the face of Christian faith of today is young, southern and predominantly female.”

The criteria by which I thus am characterised highlight my position in relation to others within a network of power relations in the field of mission and ecumenical relations of churches.

How does mission and power [speak] to you if you are considered to be in a power position but at the same moment you face [the fact] that mission in your highly secularised society is almost powerless. A wide spread understanding marginalises mission as [what] you do not do, also within the mainline churches which for instance value diaconia highly. And again, other expressions of the Christian faith like charismatic migrant churches from Africa and Asia challenge you as “preaching persuasive words of wisdom” whereas they claim their mission to be “a demonstration of the Spirit and the Power.” From this standpoint we chose the theme, “Mission between power and powerlessness,” *Ohnmacht*. (You should note that the German original term for powerlessness is a strong expression denoting to be without command to the extent of being absolutely helpless.) We are the staff and members of the EMW (Association of Protestant Churches and Mission in Germany), of the Academy of Mission at the University of Hamburg, and of the German Association of Mission Studies.

Looking back to Edinburgh 1910 we realised that those present there from Germany faced a comparable setting: those assembled definitely had power in relation to mission and mission churches overseas and they attempted to stick to this power, but they also complained about disinterest in mission in their society and the churches.

Today, the mainline churches in Germany like the Lutheran ones to which I adhere have integrated most of the former mission societies into the church. Second: many of the so-called partner churches in the southern hemisphere are the heirs of the former missions from Germany. So there are a lot of historic relations and deliberate attempts to journey together from a dependency situation to a partnership situation, exploring various understandings and activities in mission:

Mission and evangelism, mission and development, partnership. The mechanisms of organising the relations are sometimes questioned tending to redirect the control back to the North. It is not only about money, but also about knowledge, skills, education, and the number of trained specialists. And it is not only about who has but about who is defining

the focus, which approaches are taken and who is forging the instruments.

In this network of relations we proposed to study closer two themes.

We proposed to explore in this situation our mission in the light of vulnerability. We can relate here to the report on Theme 5 speaking also on vulnerability. There are those who are vulnerable to the dangers of their contexts like poverty, violence, insecurity, racism, injustice, and untimely death. To become vulnerable means here to really look and to become sensitive to those who are vulnerable.

There is a second meaning that is to choose to become vulnerable. What could it mean? For instance, to be attentive to the charismata of the others. So called migrant churches are often perceived as being in need of assistance, an object of diaconia. Their insistence on the power of the Holy Spirit is often denied or ridiculed by reproach that is based on a pre-modern, unenlightened reading of the Bible.

So where they are vulnerable they are seen, but where they do have charismata, they are silenced because their way of doing theology does not fit into the structures. One field where such a mission of becoming vulnerable can be explored is a very basic activity which everyone can join: the sharing of the Bible. To become vulnerable could mean here to take seriously that every woman and man can do this and not start with exercising a hermeneutical power of interpretation which rules out right from the beginning any other approach to scriptures.

Where such a change of perspective takes place we really will be listening to the ocean of stories of those who, as subjects in their own, became Christians, in history and today, like the impressive and touching testimonies we read in the report of theme 4. To make ourselves vulnerable means to be willing to listen more closely to the voice of the other and their way of witnessing.

Engaging in this we also propose to explore the metaphor of hospitality as it was, among others, proposed in a study text of the World Council of Churches. How do we live and express the hospitality we experience from God in the first place? By offering space to each other, by becoming willing to be changed by those to whom we offer or from whom we experience hospitality. If you take this approach seriously it ultimately questions if mission can identify objectives at all.

Vulnerability actually translates the German word, *Verwundbarkeit*, which can express both the meaning of being vulnerable and of becoming sensitive to the vulnerability of others. *Verwundbarkeit* may be a category for perceiving a shared history in which wounds have been inflicted upon each other. Such an orientation could at least help to dress wounds if not heal them and it definitely can help to avoid further hurt to each other by looking at power differently.

