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(109) AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY AND PARTNERSHIP WITH EUROPEAN CHURCHES

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The Beginnings

African Christianity is mainly a product of European mission work, after Africa was ‘discovered’ and colonized by Europe, with one of the goals being its Christianization. I however do not share the popular opinion that mission was a tool for colonization, but the other way round. The link between the two cannot be denied since, as we often observe, the church is a part of society, and what happens in society is reflected in the church as well.¹ Most of the time, missions worked in the colonies of their home countries.

It is no wonder that, until now, links with Africa in many aspects are with or through Europe – be it air travel to anywhere in the world, telecommunication, economic ties, etc. Africa has not succeeded in releasing itself from the cords Europe tied from the time of colonialism, including church relations.² Most of the churches in Africa have European missionary roots, until the recent wave of American-based charismatic movements. Their theologies are shaped by European denominational controversies, which Africans have adopted, sometimes without even understanding why.

From Mission Fields to Daughter Churches to Sister Churches

During the independence movements against colonialism, indigenous leaders of what have so far been called Protestant ‘mission fields’ or ‘mission churches’ fought for church independence too, many of which gained independence close to the time of political independence. One can see the debate during all international missionary conferences since Edinburgh 1910, where the concern of equality of partnership has been the issue.³

However, there was a clear difference between the independence of the church from the political independence of countries. There were formal independence celebrations when the colonial leaders left, when new flags were flown, and a radical break with the colonialists was made. Until now, however, links with the former missions continue and churches in Africa celebrate jubilees of the arrival of the first missionaries, and never the end of the missionary era. Conversely, no country celebrates the arrival of the first colonialist, but they do celebrate their departure – on Independence Day! In church contexts, missionaries were not usually expelled, and there was no real break with relations with missions abroad. What changed was leadership. The leaders of the now-independent churches wanted to maintain links and relationships with the missions with great respect. Many missionaries remained and continued to work under new leadership. Later, the number of missionaries diminished, not because of expulsion but due to financial constraints in their sending missions.

These mission fields slowly became ‘daughter churches’, continuing to benefit from relationships with missions, including different forms of grants and support until now. The grants target mainly diaconic and

¹ The WCC was formed in the same year as United Nations (UN) – in 1948 – and the All Africa Conference of Churches in the same year as the Organization for African Union (OAU, renamed African Union-AU) in 1963.

² Globalization (and global dominance of America) has opened up links with other continents, especially Asia, but the primary links are still with Europe.

³ See, for example, Lothar Bauerochse, *Miteinander Leben und Lernen: Zwischenkirchliche Partnerschaften als Ökumenische Lerngemeinschaften* (Erlangen, Germany: Verlag der Evangelische Lutherische Mission, 1996), especially chapter 1.

developmental structures and institutions. Schools, hospitals, orphanages, offices of the churches, car-pools and printing facilities, were established even in remote areas where the colonialists never penetrated. These are based on the financial systems established by missions, but they were foreign to the normal lives of the people in Africa. After the missionaries had left, missions continued to finance these institutions, including payment systems of church workers and pension schemes. These have proven to be difficult for independent young church to take over and finance.

As a result, African churches have continued to be dependent on their 'mother churches' for heavy financial investments, including expensive administrative structures. This is, however, again reflected also in broader society, whereby even colonial countries continue to finance a big chunk of the budgets of their former colonies. The structures established by colonialism such as cities, universities, parliaments, cabinets, elections and governance structures, cannot easily be financed by local resources.

Partnership?

The idea of partnership is theological.⁴ Based on our understanding of Scripture – that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and church is a spiritual entity which does not depend on worldly power – what is needed is a partnership of equals before God. But is such partnership possible in this unequal world?

The roles of African and European churches were from the beginning defined by history. Europe is the initiator of ideas and the wealthier partner, while Africa is a receiver! But these roles are not considered theologically correct.

After serving in ecumenical context several years, I regret to have to admit that these roles are not easily changed. I realize that it is very difficult for Europeans to change their role as giver and learn to receive (from Africans), just as it is difficult for African churches to change and learn to give (to Europeans). Because of these traditional roles, African churches have not assumed their equal share of responsibility in ecumenical affairs, just as European churches would not like to be seen as recipients.

Attempts to Forge an Equal Partnership

There have been several attempts to enhance equality in partnership since it is the wish of both partners. This is the attempt of many forms of partnership, e.g. between church districts, congregations, institutions, etc. There have been several forms of structural change in missions to reflect this understanding.⁵ The goal of restructuring is to put into practice the theological conviction that no church is too poor to give something, and no church is too rich to receive from others, and all churches are equal. However, since the financial burden of running missions as well as global ecumenical bodies is still carried mostly by European churches, and the financial contributions of African churches are next to negligible, it remains only a theologically correct feeling. And I have to say, African churches have the capacity to do more, if they shed the enslavement of the role of being a happy receiver.

There have been structures deliberately placed within missions to negotiate with their African church partners on equal terms.⁶

⁴ See Bauerochse, 156-65.

⁵ Several mission organizations have transformed themselves into global partnership of equals between the former 'daughter churches' and European churches over several decades. See Kai Funkschmidt, *Earthing the Vision: Strukturreformen in der Mission untersucht am Beispiel von CEVAA (Paris), CWM (London) und UEM (Wuppertal)* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2000).

⁶ See e.g. Eila Helander and Wilson Niwagila, *Partnership and Power* (Erlangen, Germany: Verlag der Evangelische Lutherische Mission, 1996). Many mission supporters in certain countries of Europe unite and form round tables to deal with issues with their partners. African churches have no such possibility of co-ordinating with each other before

An Intrinsically Unequal Partnership

I would like to highlight some areas which I believe demonstrate the continuing inequality in partnership between African and European churches.

Structural level

What annoys the African church leaders most is the fact that, in European churches, African churches are not regarded the same as other European churches. In very few cases have European churches signed partnership agreements with churches in Africa. Many of the missions which started the African churches are no longer independent institutions but departments within European churches, mainly called 'ecumenical departments'. Communication between African churches and European churches takes place within these departments and the top leadership of African churches. When an African bishop visits a European church, a former 'mother church', an African bishop is received by a head of ecumenical department, sometimes not even a pastor, with a 'courtesy call' to the office of the fellow church leader. But official talks are conducted by the ecumenical department. I am aware that, when dealing with other church leaders from Europe or America, that the bishop of the European church takes a lead.

There is a clear similarity with society at large. In political relations, European countries have two separate ministries dealing with foreign countries. For European and other richer countries, the ministry of foreign affairs is responsible. But for African and other poorer continents, it is a lower-regarded ministry, normally called 'development co-operation' which is responsible. In general, foreign ministers of European countries, let alone heads of countries, do not visit Africa. It is normally the minister responsible for 'development co-operation' who comes as a donor. Topics of discussion are not the mutual exchange of ideas and formulating common strategy on something, but listening to the needs of the poor country and stating the conditions of support, or inspecting whether these conditions have been met. And African countries must do all they can not to offend the donors, whose action can have serious financial repercussions to the government. Are churches any different?

Theological level

I am not sure there is a genuine feeling of equality at the theological level. I time and again hear and see indications of feelings of superiority and inferiority on the theological side. I do not think that the theological ideas of Africans are taken as seriously as those of European theologians. During debates on theologically contentious issues, I very often hear comments from European theologians and leaders which demonstrate feelings of superiority. At the same time, African churches are frustrated by the trivialization of the issues they want to bring to discussion in global venues. The issues of spirits of the dead (though unresolved in Europe as well), polygamy, witchcraft and superstition, are not taken seriously by European churches. But they use money and power to make sure the issues they raise are indeed taken up by African churches, or else...

The money factor

It is always said: let us keep money out of the partnership. It never happens. This is because money is simply a medium of exchange. There is nothing discussed more in the churches, both in Europe or in Africa, than money. Let us be honest: money is always central to any interaction. We may imagine we have partnerships which do not have financial aspects. Who pays, who gives, who receives, who reports to whom, what are the conditions of getting money, and the attitude and style of reporting requirements, are all major aspects of partnerships. Proper reporting and accountability are simply good stewardship, within

meeting one particular mission organization. The power relations are clear.

one church or between churches. I find it unfair for African churches to use political correctness in the idea of partnership to avoid financial accountability, which they should have even within their own churches.

The back-donor factor

But there is a new development in Europe which strongly influences the partnership between European and African churches, i.e. the back donor. As the churches and former missions have less and less money, the role of the para-church development agencies is reshaping the partnership. The areas of co-operation are more and more determined not by the churches, but by the 'specialized ministries'. These are essentially agencies established, backed and originally financed by churches in Europe after the World War II. Therefore money is more available for humanitarian and development activities, which the missions started and financed for decades⁷ since the idea of separation between mission and development is foreign to African churches.

Specialized ministries are financed largely by private donations and governments as 'back-donors'. These back-donors have demands and conditions for project funding which the 'specialized ministries' pass on to the recipient African churches. Since the African churches need the money to serve their people, they are forced to accept these conditions which are sometimes strange. For example, African churches have always seen people from their partner churches in Europe as fellow missionaries in one global mission. But through these development agencies, with conditions from their donors against excluding non-believers, churches sometimes are forced to accept employees from Europe who have no affinity with church. I remember seeing one such person who was provocatively washing his car in front of the church during Sunday service who, when confronted, responded that attending a church service was not in his job description, and he was free to use his time as he wished. And since the partnership follows the same pattern as governments in Europe, there are cases where churches in Africa are forced not to bring faith matters into the partnership, or are asked to put aside their ethical convictions, because they are excluded by the 'back-donors'.

Changing dynamics

All relationships are in some way influenced by economic power, whether in a small village or at a global level. No matter what European countries may criticize China for (human rights, hacking, environmental concerns, economic espionage), it cannot pass any resolutions or take any action against China. It is simply too important for European economic survival. As long as Africa is economically weak in relation to Europe, the African churches continue to think along the same lines as their governments. As long as European countries deal with Africa at the level of 'development co-operation' and not 'foreign relations', the churches find it difficult to escape the *Zeitgeist*.

But the dynamics are changing. More and more African churches no longer depend on European churches to run their affairs. Most churches would survive a donation moratorium, which was not the case in the 1970s.⁸ More and more partnerships will be based on aspects other than economics. Indeed, some church social and developmental services would suffer much in the event of a moratorium, but most church ministries are not any longer supported from abroad.

The question before us is whether the traditional donor-recipient roles are changing after so many years of discussion and the desire for equal partnership. In my experience, both sides have serious problems in embracing the changing circumstances and adapting positively. I do not see African churches doing their

⁷ Konrad Raiser, 'Foreword', in *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth: The Findings of 'Project 21*, ed. Michael Taylor, (London and Geneva: SPCK and WCC, 2003), ix.

⁸ Eugenia Ombwayo Adoyo, *Mission and Moratorium in Africa: The issues underlying the proposal for a missionary moratorium, and the implications of its failure for the future of mission/church relationships in Africa (with special reference to English-speaking Africa)* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 1990).

fair share in global ecumenical responsibilities as much as they are capable of. And I do not see the European churches ready to be just like others, not being the dominant donor. It is even more difficult for them to be humble enough to receive. I lead an organization which is focusing on transforming these roles, but I see how difficult it is to change.⁹ For example, at the local level of partnership between church districts in Germany and an African church, partnership groups in Germany are totally surprised when they hear that a delegation from Africa will pay its own airfares. They have no problem about being asked for such items. This change is difficult for both partners.

As African churches are feeling more economically independent, they also feel freer to express what they think and even challenge their European partners theologically. Since it has always been the role of the donor to threaten ending a partnership if the African Church does not behave, the tables are turned when an African church gives an ultimatum to a European church to explain its theological position on some matter, or else the African Church will end the partnership! This is new! And no European church is used to facing an ultimatum from an African church.

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⁹ Brunhild von Local, *Von Fremdheit und Freundschaft* (Wuppertal, Germany: United Evangelical Mission, 2011).