

Theological Symposium FELM

Changing Role of a Missionary

I am grateful to FELM for the invitation to participate in this beautiful Theological Symposium contributing with the theme “Changing Role of a Missionary.” It relates to how the centers of Christianity shifted to the global South in the last decades. It also gives opportunity to address conceptual and practical aspects related to the future of mission and the relationships between the mission agencies and the receiving churches and its theological implications.

Allow me to start with an astounding affirmation that captured my attention during long time. It happens in the narrative regarding the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus: “today, salvation has come to this house”. Such gracious words offered to a chief tax collector that, in his context, “ranked atop the list of sinners as corrupt and guilty people”¹ has always impressed me. In times of fast changes, the church is invited to deepen into Jesus’ ministry to find afresh meanings for mission.

Change of the World Christian Landscape

In 1910, the world’s Christian population was 80% mostly localized in the global North. After 60 years, in the 70s Christians were present in the entire world. The intense mission work contributed to the growth from 43% to 59% of the Christian population in the global South.

Meanwhile, most of European Christian countries became more open to religious diversity; the global South grew in Christian population.²

Conversion and birth in Christian families are two of the main factors influencing that shift from the global North to the global South:

- Missionaries pioneered in sharing the gospel and engaging in evangelism/conversion. They also contributed to the development of churches which locally engaged in mission.
- Pentecostal and Charismatic churches/movements – also called Renewalists had a enormous growth during the last five decades.
- Revival movements within the Roman Catholic Church added to the new evangelization. To this, the election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis motivated many to return to the church.

The growth of Christianity in the global South³ indicate: Africa from 11.6% in 1970 to 21.8% in 2010; Asia from 7.8% in 1970 to 15.2% in 2010 mostly due to conversion; Latin America had a slight increase from 22.0% in 1970 to 24.1% in 2010. The fast growth among Christians happened in Evangelical churches with principles or renewal movements and the prosperity theology.

Evangelicals, a global movement within Pentecostalism that consist of all affiliated church members self-identifying as Evangelical that “claim that there are 706 Evangelical denominations worldwide with a total of around 300 million adherents in 2010.”⁴

In 1970, Renewalists were 5.1% of all Christians and grew to 25.8% in 2010. This growth has impacted mission that focused in conversion of believers from other Christian faith or religions. In Africa it grew from 18.8 million in 1970 to an estimated 226.2 million by 2020; in Latin America from

¹ Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event. Call and challenge of a church protestant*. Fortress Press 2010, p. 129.

² Report by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, page 6.

³ Statistics in Christianity in its global context from 1970 – 2020 – June 2013

⁴ World Christian Encyclopaedia (Oxford University Press, 1982, 1001)

12.8 million to 203.1 million in Latin America; and in Asia from 9.3 million to 165.6 million. Pentecostal and Charismatic movements are considered in series of three types⁵.

Pentecostals (Type 1)

Pentecostal denominations affirming that all Christians should seek a post-conversion religious experience called “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” and that a Spirit-baptized believer may receive one or more of the supernatural gifts known in the early church, especially speaking in tongues.

Charismatics (Type 2)

Recognize the existence of Pentecostal individuals within the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. By recognizing themselves as “renewed in the Spirit,” a powerful supernatural event, remain to renew within their mainline non-Pentecostal denominations instead of joining Pentecostal denominations. They report some or all of the gifts of the Spirit but speaking in tongues are optional.

Independent Charismatics (Type 3)

Emerging from established Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations, not identifying themselves with the other types exercise gifts of the Spirit with much less emphasis on tongues. In many cases, they have linked to prosperity theology with strong mega churches and ministries focused in spiritual/emotive fabrics and a more literal understanding of the scriptures.

Most of the Pentecostal, Charismatic, or Independent churches were influenced by traditional movements aiming at counteracting the growth of liberation theologies and its critical thinking that contributed to analytical and contextual reading of the scriptures, self-affirmation, and reflection about the relation between culture and gospel; and discussions in mainline churches included aspects of self-sustaining, autonomy and identity.

Relationships in mission

Changes also happened in the relationships between sending mission agencies and local churches. Traditionally, missionaries were pastors, medical workers, administrators, engineers, teachers; etc. with a long term call to plant churches, administer their growth, promote development, and educate new leaders – also developing seminaries. The control of resources, determination of the nature and scope of church planting, and the role of missionaries as main leaders have changed from a colonial approach to a more liberating and inclusive. Missionaries today assume tasks that are assigned by the local churches and the sending partner and also their role as advisor, consultants, mentors, or facilitators.

Change of attitude in the relationship has started to promote mutual learning. Missionaries are “guests”⁶ in partnership. Being bridge builders, missionaries are learning how to deal with decision making issues aware that still there is the power financial resources in the relationship. Local leaders are more empowered to take decisions. “Accompaniment”⁷ played a key role in mission and diaconal work especially in supporting churches in aspects of management (PMER). One needs to

⁵ Center for the Study of Global Christianity: Christianity in its Global Context, 1970-2020 Society, Religion, and Mission; pages 18-19.

⁶ This is a theological concept linked to the gracious presence of God in the Eucharist; a means of grace where guests are invited to be empowered in order to go to their daily life to serve.

⁷ A theological concept developed by the ELCA in dialogue with partner churches in LAC and inspired by the Emmaus narrative sets the possibility to walk together and being accompanied know that the hearts warmed up in the middle of difficult challenges.

recognize that capacity among local leaders is still a challenge that requires long term processes of formation to bear solid outcomes adding to the sustainability of the local churches.

Missionaries and local leaders look for solutions to specific challenges by listening, learning, and growing alongside with the persons being served. Learning together while proclaiming the gospel in actions and word is a contextual empowerment especially in the side of missionaries.

Other factors that contribute to change are: Government decisions in reinforcing policies for work permission to missionaries (India, Myanmar, and Malaysia) or the increasing nationalistic awareness in other countries arguing that the Christian faith impacts the populations' national identity. The rise of fundamentalist religious ideologies (Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia) argues that foreign influences change peoples' faith. The financial global impact that forced mission agencies to reduce support for long term positions and engaging them in short term assignments mainly focused in building local competences.

Mission in the global South has taken another level. Mission is done also from the global South (Korea, India, Brazil, China, etc.) sending missionaries to neighbouring countries. There are various cases where mission organizations from Europe support these initiatives.

Theological and Practical Aspects in Mission

Mission is the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit's inspiration, the church is moved to proclaim the good news that Christ the Saviour is the foundation of faith and the source of all transforming missions⁸. Then, mission begins with a proclamation of a small group of followers that shared the teachings and actions of a poor carpenter and itinerate preacher from Nazareth.

If you were to write the story of your life, how might you begin to introduce yourself? In the gospels each writer takes a different approach in introducing us to Jesus, and consequently, Jesus' mission.

Matthew begins with a genealogy. He wants us to know who Jesus' kin is. Perhaps we would do well to think about who we would include in our own families, would we follow our mother's family background or our father's family background. Who would we leave in or leave out? **Luke** writes this life story of Jesus to a friend, Theophilus. He wants to get this story straight, tell some truth as there have been so many accounts (Luke 1:1-3). It might be interesting to ponder what truths would we tell about ourselves.

John focuses on the spiritual dimensions of life; new beginnings are coming into being, a new light is shining in the world. I would like to focus on **Mark**, who begins the beginning of Jesus Christ, the son of God using the word euaggelion, literally, "a good message" or good news. The word choice is fascinating as it takes the oppressors message of the day and turns it towards another purpose.

The Romans conquered village after village calling it the euaggelion or the good news of the arrival of the "pax Romana". Mark takes the same word to announce the "pax Christi". Mark clearly introduces another notion that not Rome but Christ had control of the hearts of the people.

There are many ways we could introduce Jesus to others. We could focus on his ministry, message, and deeds and yet Jesus was more than a pastor or priest. He was more than a preacher and a teacher. Mission begins with an identity of who we are in our relationship to Jesus. Mark looks at the relationship between the father/mother and son.

⁸ LWF/DMD, Mission in Context, p. 25.

The good news for Mark is that Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God. And it all began with his identity publically expressed in his baptism. Looking at Mark's opening words, what was it that attracted Jesus to John?

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven: You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you. Mark 1:9-11

The image of Jesus coming up, out of the water, offers a whole new sense of life. The heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove speaks of a beloved Son. God is the dwelling place no longer far from us. Jesus' baptism confirms his mission. Our baptism mirrored through the embodied God is the call into the divine consciousness that defines mission for us. Baptism is the gift, the beginning of mission for each of us.

I affirm that the good news Jesus brought established a new way to relate. It invites us to the use of the power of love and care as an alternative to the kingdoms of today that promise the arrival of peace based on the power of exclusion. Engaged in God's mission, we are part of empowered communities with the ability to build relations that promote interaction as family/relatives – kin. The activities resulting from our faith are God's action through the movement of the Spirit of solidarity. We are beloved children of God. This is our restored identity in Jesus Christ. This identity enriches our daily action and dependence on a God of love and mercy to continue in this mission of inclusion, participation, and care⁹.

Coming back to the narrative regarding Zacchaeus, we can see that many of the marginalized poor and needed people; among them gentiles coming from the other side of the lake – the other side that also means uncircumcised and impure people, followed Jesus during his ministry. Most of the followers were astonished by Jesus' compassion. They followed Jesus in faith. But there also were blinded people; blinded by the power of their religious position, or the power of money and the status as governors. Zacchaeus is one of them enjoying a good financial position but not a healthy life. His name literally means "pure, innocent" and ironically is contradicted by his acts. The narrative points out to his short stature it rather refers to his *inability to mature in character*¹⁰ to understand the meaning of leadership where trust is needed to respectfully relate with persons others.

Theologian Whestelle brilliantly paraphrases Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus to immediately come down from the tree. He writes: "Zacchaeus, get down from there and face your own low and debased stature and know yourself for what you truly are. And today I must get into your luxurious and secured home as you have invaded and plundered the poor houses of this people. [Even in a severe manner, Jesus offers God's grace to a person that] trembles down from his tree, which means literally that he repents, meets his true stature, exposes his character for what it is. Zacchaeus, of course, is a bit embarrassed but relieved, as is someone who admits to a long-hidden wrong doing."¹¹ Jesus' healing action liberates Zacchaeus from its arrogance over others. Now humbly, Zacchaeus goes to the streets by its own initiative giving half of his possessions to the poor, and recognizing he has cheated others out of anything and paying back four times the amount (Luke 19:8).

⁹ The presentation up here in this title "Theological and Practical Aspects in Mission" has been shared in *The Sherer Lecture* on October 04, 2017 in Chicago entitled "Mission – The Call into Life of Transformational Community," pages 1-2.

¹⁰ Westhelle, *The Church Event. Call and challenge of a church protestant*, p. 130.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 131.

The narrative relates to the story of the church in mission. “It demonstrates how church happens in its transitioning [process] between house and street”¹²; it means in the movement. The church as God’s body is active reaching persons in sacred spaces that also are on the streets. That movement between house and street happens by the active role of the same Spirit active in our baptism. Healing produces, especially in contexts with challenging histories like the global South, is a continuous activity seeking repentance and restoration. And this task needs a public recognition and, at the same time, a planned work within the church dependant in the action of the Spirit.

For us as Lutherans, it is important to address mission as empowerment and reconciliation as a central task pertaining to God. It aims at being active churches in the public space and finding ways to cultivate relationships with other churches like the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. There is opportunity for mutual enrichment and learning that brings the possibility to enhance capacities ecumenically with and among churches in the global South.

Yes, there is still the need for transparent and timely procedures in various churches in the global South. Nevertheless, transparency is part of a realistic engagement also within partner churches. Mutual empowerment in this aspect implies that each part in mission carries their gifts that contribute in strengthen human and institutional capacities for mission.

Zacchaeus’ example is still relevant today. It brings the opportunity for change of mind sets and attitudes to perceive and act in mission as partners. The value in this encounter remains in the human dignity as image of God strongly linked to respect that will add value to relationships that are still mediated by finances. And healing makes part in these relationships in order to overcome aspects related to the mismanagement of power. Solidarity and respect help overcoming any complex of superiority and inferiority in relationships and nourishes for transformation where God initiates and renews relations to be developed in kindness.

It is also relevant to consider the multi-faith contexts in the global South inviting for mutual learning instead of changing others contexts (cultures). How to contextualize the Lutheran doctrine without losing the complexity of existing faiths in the global South? How mission can renew the sense of being in even (not being uniform but appreciating differences) relationships? God’s mission opens the doors to embrace persons from different realities, persons from the other side of the lake who are also gifted with capacities to contribute in mission.

Rev. Dr Patricia Cuyatti – Area Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean
Department of Mission and Development – The Lutheran World Federation

¹² Ibid, 129. Westhelle asserts that mission is an activity happening as well as in the temple, out in the streets but never remains in either space; most of the times it happens in both spaces.