



Bridges and Gaps: Mission Partnership in South Africa

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“THIS IS OUR FIRST VISIT TO AFRICA. CAN YOU GIVE OUR GROUP SOME ADVICE about what we should or should not do during our time in South Africa? What should we expect?” The members of the group from the ELCA companion synod leaned closer to hear my response. And the short response is this: mission partnership is in crisis. It is like driving down a road full of potholes—avoiding one pothole, you invariably hit another. But as David Bosch has pointed out,

crisis is where danger and opportunity meet. Some see only the opportunity and rush on, oblivious of the pitfalls on all sides. Others are only aware of the danger and become so paralyzed by it that they back off. We can, however, only do justice to our high calling if we acknowledge the presence of both danger and opportunity and execute our mission within the field of tension engendered by both.¹

¹David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 7.

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Mission partners meet across genuine difference. Every meeting, in the name of Jesus, makes us realize that we have already met, that we have not yet met, and that we have still to meet.

Therefore in a longer response I would say this about mission partnership: There are both bridges and gaps in mission relationships, past, present, and future. There is no unambiguous or unproblematic entry point. It is always tempting to make one more new and improved list of what “should” or “should not” be done or said in order to have more successful mission partnerships. Roy Enquist, for example, explains, “The first step in God’s Mission to make many rich is for believers to go out with empty hands to meet their neighbors.” And Zephaniah Kameeta adds, “[W]hen we go empty handed to one another, we can embrace...when we are loaded down with luggage it is difficult even to shake hands.”² But the problem, as I see it, is that we are never empty handed! We always carry baggage.

I. WE HAVE ALREADY MET

Even as we meet for the first time, we discover that have already met, and yet we have not met, and we still have to meet. In every encounter, even the first one, we come with the baggage of our personality, gender, culture, race, open and hidden agendas, preconceptions, hopes and fears. This both enables and hinders communication and cooperation. However, in my view it is not a question of getting rid of baggage but rather of understanding the complexity, ambiguity, and promise of mutual relationships (including our mission partnerships), with all their baggage.

For Lutherans arriving for the first time in South Africa and for those who have been around awhile it is important to realize that Lutherans have been involved in different kinds of relationships in Southern Africa for over 150 years. Historically, Lutheran mission work in Southern Africa has been divided into three phases:

- the pioneer period (1829-1889)
- the period of Lutheran cooperation (1889-1957)
- the period of consolidation and church establishment (1957-1965)³

The early 1960s saw the transition from mission-run synods to regional churches. The Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa (FELCSA) was established in 1966 with the aim of further consolidating and unifying the various Lutheran churches. However, only four regional churches came together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) in 1975. Unity talks with the two “white” churches (ELCSA-Natal/Transvaal and ELCSA-Cape Church) have continued sporadically for over twenty years, with little progress thus far.⁴

²Roy J. Enquist, *Namibia: Land of Tears, Land of Promise* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1990) 134-136. Enquist cites Kameeta on page 135.

³See Hans W. Florin, *Lutherans in South Africa*, rev. ed. (Durban: Lutheran Publishing House, 1967) 94; Carl J. Hellberg, *A Voice of the Voiceless: The Involvement of the Lutheran World Federation in Southern Africa 1947-1977* (Lund: Skeab/Verbum, 1979) 30-3; Manas Buthelezi, “The Vision of Mission in Southern Africa” (paper presented to the ELCSA-Mission Partners’ Consultation, Tlhabane, Swaziland, 30 September- 4 October, 1995) 1-4.

⁴Georg Scriba with Gunnar Lislerud, “Lutheran Missions and Churches in South Africa,” in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997) 193.

For ELCSA, with 600,000 members, the past thirty years has been a time of struggle, not only against apartheid but for identity and survival. In an interview in October 1997, Bishop Manas Buthelezi maintained that “consolidation” is still not complete. In fact, old and new patterns of dependence, independence, and interdependence continue to exist side by side.

Besides their work in evangelism and church planting, Lutheran mission societies were all involved separately and together in establishing mission schools and mission hospitals. Much of the growth and influence of the Lutheran church in Southern Africa came through these mission- and later church-run institutions.

Visitors coming for the first time need to be aware that because of this long history and because of our preconceptions and expectations of each other, right or wrong as they may be, we discover that there is no clean slate or innocent beginning. Our cultures, worlds, races, and churches have already met, and the ground is not level.

II. WE HAVE NOT YET MET

How can we be partners? As Lutheran missiologist James Scherer has asked, “Is genuine partnership really possible between churches of unequal strength, resources and historical background?”⁵

Each of the mission societies has a unique and different history, but all express the historical and theological need for and importance of mutual and equal partnership in mission. Partnerships started in most cases through some kind of personal initiative. But as the number of partnerships increased, each mission society felt the need to develop an overall strategy and structure for their cooperation with the local churches in Europe and Southern Africa. The ELCA developed the companion synod program as a framework for its 65 synods in the early 1990s. While differences were clearly and often painfully evident, especially between the mission societies themselves, there is also the perception from “below” that the missionaries or expatriate coworkers were all the same in terms of power, privilege, and paternalism—whether they came from Germany, Norway, Sweden, or the United States. These often opposite images and experiences need to be better understood in theory and in practice.

Numerous mission-church cooperation agreements were hammered out over the years, but as long as power remained in the hands of the overseas mission societies, as Wilson Niwagila observed, “There was no mutuality, it was a paternalistic relationship instead of mutual partnership.” He also asserted bluntly that it is “hypocrisy to talk about partnership as equality and mutuality when it does not exist in reality.”⁶

⁵James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 33.

⁶Eila Helander and Wilson Niwagila, *Partnership and Power: A Quest for Reconstruction in Mission* (Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1996) 81-85.

How do we meet? The Catholic theologian Robert Schreiter has outlined seven common ways of perceiving the other, which may often occur in various combinations, namely, “To demonize, romanticize, colonize, generalize, trivialize, homogenize and vaporize the other.”⁷ Similarly, Theo Sundermeier describes three common but problematic models of encountering the other that variously stress, in a one-sided way, similarity, difference, or complementarity.⁸

Have we really met, or do we still have to meet, and how? The story of the two companions on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and the division of the goats and the sheep (Matt 25:31-46) are reminders of how difficult it is for people to recognize and distinguish the other in God and God in the other.

Jean-Marc Éla has observed that Protestant missionary societies’ expansion in the nineteenth century encouraged the proliferation of local churches through the promotion of the three-self formula. The local church was to be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, but what has resulted, in his view, is “at best...second rate inculturation, a tame hybrid, neither fish nor fowl, harmless, non-controversial.” Éla asks, “How can we express our belonging to God in a continent that does not belong to itself?...In practice modernization creates dependency.”⁹ Already in the 1960s Scherer observed that, “The younger churches are peculiarly the children of western Christianity. They cannot deny their parentage, nor can they wholly eradicate wrong directions or inappropriate policies inherited from the last century.”¹⁰ He referred to the three-self formula as a “trojan horse.”

Enrique Dussel reminds us that Columbus did not “discover” America. Rather, he died believing that the islands he saw were part of Asia (thus, Indians!). As Dussel puts it, “The Other was not discovered but...in fact covered over.”¹¹ Just as Dussel describes the process of invention, conquest, colonization, and the “covering” of the other in the Americas, writers like V. Y. Mudimbe and Kwame Appiah have done the same for Africa.¹² In a recent article, Tinyiko Maluleke expresses his appreciation for the noble motivations of those seeking to recover the black presence in mission history, but also critically exposes the dangers, ambiguities, and complexities involved for those who would dare attempt to uncover the voices of the marginalized and muted.¹³

⁷Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 52-53.

⁸Theo Sundermeier, *Den Fremden Verstehen: Eine Praktische Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) 73-75.

⁹Cited in Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 247.

¹⁰James A. Scherer, *Missionary, Go Home! A Reappraisal of the Christian World Mission* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 100.

¹¹Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995) 36.

¹²V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); Kwame Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹³Tinyiko S. Maluleke, “The Quest for Muted Black Voices in History: Some Pertinent Issues in (South) African Mission Historiography,” *Missionalia* 28/1 (2000).

Jesus' teaching to remove the log from one's own eye before attempting to remove the speck in someone else's eye proves more difficult than I had thought (Matt 7:1-5). When one log is removed, often a new and different log becomes apparent, one which was not visible before, with its own deep and intricate root system! Undoing the log jam is a lifelong process. No generation of mission partners has been or will be exempt from the complexity and ambiguity of negotiating these relationships and their outcomes.

The intention of this short essay is not to judge from a superior or a neutral position but to emphasize that there is complexity and ambiguity in each meeting, in each era, and in every vocabulary, model, or paradigm. In each era, including the present one, we can point to successes and failures. It is humbling to realize that our vision is not particularly better or worse than that of the previous generations. In spite of many, many years of encounters, meetings, and conversations there are many voices we have not yet heard.

III. WE STILL HAVE TO MEET

When Bishop Manas Buthelezi spoke to the ELCSA-Mission Partners' Consultation in 1995, a consultation whose stated purpose was "to review together where we are in our respective understanding of the mission task of the church," he posed several critical questions: "Are we still talking about the same thing when we use the word *mission* in our respective contexts as members of the Lutheran Communion? What is the vision of our future together? Or are we nearing the parting of ways?"¹⁴

Fifteen years earlier, John Mbiti had stated:

The church in Africa seems to have an incomplete picture or understanding of mission....They have done no serious thinking about the mission of the church in Africa, the mission that emanates from Africa and not from overseas....The process of conscientizing the church to reflect on its own participation in mission must be accelerated...so that the whole people of God participates.¹⁵

But who does have a complete picture, and who can predict the outcome? Terence Ranger rightly observed that, "African Christianity, as it evolves, corresponds neither to missionary nor indigenous hopes or expectations."¹⁶ Kwame Bediako writes about what he calls the "surprise story" of African Christianity in the twentieth century: "It is not what Western missionaries did or did not do but what Africans did, and have done with the Gospel that is proving to be the more enduring element."¹⁷ Mbiti made a similar point when he affirmed the missionary en-

¹⁴Buthelezi, "Vision of Mission," 2.

¹⁵Mbiti's address, delivered at a conference in Monrovia, Liberia, 10-17 April 1980, is published in *All Africa Lutheran Conference on Christian Theology and Strategy for Mission Report* (Geneva: LWF Department of Church Cooperation, 1980) 196.

¹⁶In Martin Prozesky, ed., *Christianity in Southern Africa* (Bergville: Southern Book Publishers, 1990) 13.

¹⁷Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 207.

deavor, but without making the (western) missionary the central figure, when he said, “They did not bring God, rather God brought them.”¹⁸ Buthelezi is quite correct when he says that ELCSA is not yet out of the pioneering stages of her history and calls for the redefinition of a new vision of mission.

Referring to the conquest of the Americas, Tzvetan Todorov writes:

We are like the conquistadors and we differ from them; their example is instructive but we shall never be sure that by *not* behaving like them we are not in fact on the way to imitating them, as we adapt ourselves to new circumstances. But their history can be exemplary for us because it permits us to reflect upon ourselves, to discover resemblances as well as differences [as] self-knowledge develops through knowledge of the Other.¹⁹

With Todorov, I agree that “the other remains to be discovered...[that] each of us must begin it over again in turn, the previous experiments do not relieve us of our responsibilities but can teach us the effects of misreading the facts.”²⁰

This discussion of Lutheran partnership discourse and mission activity in South Africa stresses the need to retrieve and listen to the mission stories of continuity and discontinuity, and to show that each encounter consists of connections and differences, dangers and opportunities. The fact that none of the South African Lutheran churches attended the special Truth Commission Hearings for Religious Bodies or presented an official explanation raises many questions. Clearly there are many stories that Lutherans have not yet been able to tell or hear even amongst themselves. We live with powerful myths and memories of ourselves and others.

Clearly if we are to meet in new ways there is a need for an intentional process leading to a healing of the memories. We all need to tell the three stories that the Anglican priest Fr. Michael Lapsley has spoken of, namely, what was done to me, what I did, and what I didn't do. A fourth story could be added concerning our hopes and vision for the future.

This essay argues that seeking meaningful mission partnerships involves us in a very long and open-ended relationship full of bridges and gaps, continuity and discontinuity. Miroslav Volf speaks of a “drama of embrace” that consists of four movements: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening the arms again. Behind this, Volf argues for an understanding of the fluidity of identities, the nonsymmetry of relationships, the underdetermination of the outcome, and the risk of embrace or grace.²¹

To say that we have truly met and fully understand each other and ourselves, even after 150 years of mission relationships in Southern Africa, would not be true. To say that we have not met at all during this time would be untrue as well. We

¹⁸In Bediako, *ibid.*, 118.

¹⁹Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984) 254 (his emphasis).

²⁰*Ibid.*, 247.

²¹Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 140-147.

need to attend to the differences and continuities present in each encounter. It is important to realize that genuine otherness is *not* eliminated, nor should it be, no matter how much we meet and how well we know each other.

Lutheran systematic theologian Paul Sponheim points out that, “in this actual meeting of actual others it is clear...that no single method holds sway....*We meet to work together at meeting.*”²²

Meeting the other in Jesus’ name, I point to the Jesus I know, and I point to the Jesus neither of us knows, who calls me to meet God in the other. As we meet for the first time in Jesus’ name, we realize that we have already met, that we have not yet met, and that we still have to meet. ⊕

²²Paul R. Sponheim, *Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 173 (my emphasis).