



Face to Face: Introduction

The Accompaniment Model of Mission

THE STAFF OF THE DIVISION FOR GLOBAL MISSION
OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

The concept of accompaniment has become a central theme in an emerging vision of global mission. Its promise lies in inviting the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to take seriously the contributions of the many expressions of the global church. This model for mission has emerged as a result of the interaction of churches around the world as they reflect on and evaluate their relationships with one another.

Mission has long been both a living reality in the life of the church and a challenge in its practice. Though the Lutheran Confessions did not specifically address the church's mission, we can see a natural extension of justification (*Augsburg Confession* IV) and the new obedience, or sanctification (Article VI), into mission: proclamation and service become part of God's restored and reconciled community (2 Cor 5:17–20).

The early renewal movement in the Lutheran community—the pietists, Spener, and Franke—held justification and sanctification as a core to their understanding of life and ministry, a challenge to Lutheran orthodoxy. The Halle movement got their passion for mission from this basic understanding of how God works in our world. One could say that Lutherans have understood, from the beginning, that God works in the context of our everyday lives to restore and reconcile human community.

This is the heritage of accompaniment as we understand it today, centered around God's mission of restoring community. A natural extension of this mission can be found in how Christian communities relate to one another. Accompaniment describes a walking together that practices interdependence and mutuality; it asks the questions of the "how" and "what" of mission in the context of the rela-

tionships of a reconciling God and a human community that seeks reconciliation and wholeness.

Already at the Edinburgh Mission Conference of 1910, the “how” and “why” of mission were being evaluated.¹ The accompaniment model of today is an attempt at confirming the “how” addressed in Edinburgh, while trying to redress the pitfalls experienced by the many missionary endeavors, such as instances of colonial powers following the footsteps of missionaries or vice versa.

Accompaniment also builds on some of the nineteenth-century missionary efforts toward the “three-self” marks of Protestant mission theory: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. To this is added a fourth “self”—self-articulation (see Justo Gonzales)—for churches around the world in areas such as decision making, evangelism and outreach efforts, education, and the training of leaders.

Another shift behind the accompaniment model was precipitated by the changes in mission theology prompted by Vatican II. Some new vocabulary emerged that attempts to describe the reality of mission within contextualization and inculturation.² These represent a realization that mission is a gift in itself when shared in contexts of culture and location. Robert T. Rush provides an image that parallels Jesus’ parables of pearls and treasures: Whereas mission had often been understood with the image of missionaries “taking” the gospel to every corner as pearl merchants, mission today can be described as hunting for treasures, discovering God’s presence and revelation already present.³

As accompaniment attempts to live with the “how” and “what” of mission today, a primary reality is the mutual respect of the churches that are in relationship, the companions. The conversation is no longer between a giver and a receiver, but between churches, all of which have gifts to give and to receive. The difference in kinds of gifts is not prioritized. Accompaniment seeks God’s revelation and God’s mission precisely within each context in which the church finds itself. It is about discovering the richness of gifts that emerge in a pastoral relationship (*acompañamiento pastoral*).

Accompaniment thus emphasizes relationship before resources. Development of programs and allocation of resources flow from how companions relate, rather than vice versa. Accompaniment is valued for its own sake as well as for its results. It is open-ended, with no foregone conclusions. The companions learn together in the journey. Accompaniment binds companions more closely to their Lord and further informs their mission.

This makes accompaniment incarnational. It is about a God who is in mission among us; and it is about us being in mission with God and with others to

¹James Scherer, *Gospel, Church, and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 15.

²Robert Schreiter and Stephen Bevans are key mission scholars who have interpreted these concepts.

³As noted in Stephen Bevans, *Models for Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 56.

whom God reaches out. Therefore, accompaniment is not only the “doing” of mission, but it is also concerned about “being” in mission. It is about being transformed to be what God has intended us to be, in relation to God and in relation with one another.

Lesslie Newbigin⁴ provides a trinitarian understanding for this incarnational model: mission is proclaiming the kingdom of the Father as faith in action; sharing the life of the Son as love in action; and bearing the witness of the Spirit as hope in action.

Martin Luther already used this pastoral and incarnational understanding, albeit with a different vocabulary—*koinonia* and the *mutua consolatio fratris* (mutual consolation of the faithful)—when speaking of how we relate to one another in our Christian vocation and within the context of the priesthood of all believers. The church in mission is this *being* together in our journeys of faith. We do this in our sacramental lives. We do this in our fellowship and in our evangelism (the good stewardship of the gospel). And this is the *communio* celebrated around the world, the relationship the ELCA experiences with many Lutheran and other churches in communion.

Accompaniment is an exciting and dynamic way of looking at mission. It presents a new way of looking at how the ELCA works with and among God’s people everywhere. It is reflected in the mutuality and sharing of gifts that develop in relationships, such as the ELCA Companion Synod Program and the exchange of missionaries. And it points to a way in which the church can see God’s kingdom breaking in anew with the cross at the center. ⊕

⁴Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

FACE . . .

Accompaniment: Interdependence rather than Domination

MARK THOMSEN

Bishop Kameeta of Namibia was recently quoted in *The Lutheran*, saying, “When people walk together, if one stumbles, the other doesn’t just proceed. You ask, ‘What is hurting you?’...There is no beggar and no giver; no one should lose humanity or dignity....Accompaniment is not the relationship of the World Bank with an African country but a relationship between believers.”

How well is the accompaniment model of mission working? The answer depends on more basic questions: *Why* did the accompaniment model of mission emerge? What is its *purpose* as initiated by the Division for Global Mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?

In 1900, eighty-five percent of the Christians in the world lived in Europe and the United States. A vision emerged that focused on the motto of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions: “The Evangelization of the World in This Generation!” The famous 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh gathered within the context of this vision. Twelve hundred participants representing 160 mission boards and societies planned cooperatively for the evangelization of the world. Almost all were from Europe and the United States. They envisioned bringing Christ to Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Many Christians of the North/West still see mission in this way, that is, *from* the North to the South, *from* the West to the East.

Contemporary world Christianity lives out of a radically different reality and vision. Over sixty percent of Christians live in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the so-called South. The churches of the South, because of evangelization and population explosions, are rapidly growing in numbers, while churches of the North diminish in numbers and historical impact.

Voices from the Christian communities of the South question the relationships of the churches of the North to the South. The mission of the Northern churches has been integrally related to Western political, economic, scientific, and cultural expansion. “Western civilization” has assumed its own superiority, and Western churches have often dominated relationships with peoples and churches of the South. Even after the colonial political period, Southern churches still speak of neocolonialism through the economic and scientific superiority of the West. Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian-African and professor of missions and world Christianity at Yale University, distinguishes “world Christianity” as a faith movement from

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TO FACE

Accompaniment: Horizontal at the Expense of Vertical?

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The concept of *accompaniment* has emerged within the Division for Global Mission (DGM) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as a paradigm for the future.

To understand accompaniment, one must grasp the sea change that has taken place in global missions. In early days, mission (and money and power) flowed from “north” to “south.” Today, most nations of the South have their own churches and leadership. We now share a “partnership in the gospel” and walk side by side. Accompaniment seeks to recognize this new situation, and it is crucial that this be done.

But is the concept of accompaniment broad enough to form a holistic foundation for global missions for the twenty-first century? The answers lie in a forty-page DGM document on accompaniment, “Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century” (GMTC).¹

This broad document is important because it contains the seminal thinking of the global mission leaders of the ELCA. To locate the “fire in the belly” of its writers—the passion of accompaniment—we must go to the heart of GMTC: its missiological statement. “This paper focuses primarily on God, the Giver of Life, as a meaningful metaphor for speaking the gospel in today’s global context” (7). The metaphor of “life” dominates the discussion, and must be properly understood: “God is on an incarnational mission to heal, restore, redeem, and liberate life” (7). Luke 4:18–19 (“good news to the poor,...release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,” etc.) follows immediately, and then John 10:10 (Jesus came that we “might have life, and have it abundantly”).

The move from Luke 4 to John 10 is exegetically significant. By associating “life” with Luke 4, accompaniment rightly notes God’s deep concern for “horizontal” matters such as poverty, release of captives, and healing. These are, to be sure, not merely temporal, as opposed to “more important” spiritual concerns; but there are indeed also important spiritual concerns that confront people. It is not a matter of either/or. We dare not lift up one at the expense of the other.

Placing John 10:10 immediately after Luke 4 suggests that “life” in John 10:10 is also horizontal. Yet the larger context (v. 9: “I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved”; v. 11: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”) shows the vertical intent of this verse.

¹<http://www.elca.org/globalmission/policy/gm21full.pdf>.

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“global Christianity” as institutional structures still dominated by the North and West.

This neocolonial reality still permeating the global church is the context birthing the mission vision designated “accompaniment.” In contrast to relationships of inequality and domination, the accompaniment model seeks to nurture interdependent relationships of mutual trust and respect. The document “Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century,” distributed by the Division for Global Mission of the ELCA, grounds accompaniment in the relationships within the Triune God and in the relational nature of God’s mission among us. The ELCA “seeks to express its mission activities in relationships and cooperation with companion churches, agencies and institutions. Mission is lived out in respectful and listening relationships.” The DGM document concludes, “The accompaniment model holds the potential to create a radical shift in power within today’s global relationships. The mutuality of walking side by side means equal sharing of decision-making and resources. It insists that old assumptions be challenged and that we listen to companions’ interpretation of their visions of mission and reality” (p. 12).

The question remains: Is it working? If it is experienced as a call heard by churches of both the South and North to new interdependent relationships, it is working well. Bishop Munib Younan of Jerusalem, speaking at a 2003 LWF Assembly preparatory meeting in Asia, said: “We must have one mission of Christ in order to face a globalized world.” Bishop Younan called for a theology of accompaniment through which “churches accompany each other on the way, sharing with each other as equals, bringing healing to each other, learning from each other.” Bishop Kameeta’s and Bishop Younan’s words witness that the accompaniment model is working well, nurturing healthy relationships grounded in biblical faith and demanded by the debilitating reality of neocolonialism.

If accompaniment means not only a new recognized call but also new experiential relationships, this is also working. A few years ago, President Humberto Ramos Salazar of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bolivia (who recently died in a motor accident) thanked Bonnie Jensen, then the executive director of DGM, for the presence and work of Rafael Malpica Padilla, now executive director of DGM. With tears he gave thanks for Malpica, ELCA’s representative, who walked the Bolivian mountains with the members of his church and slept on their floors—that is “working” accompaniment. There are a multitude of examples of an emerging interdependent worldwide Jesus movement. We in the North are enriched by the accompaniment of those in the South—by third world evangelists who call us to prayer and witness; by theological insights into justice for the poor and healing of the diseased; by music that stirs our souls; and by faith that opens our eyes to the Christ of the Emmaus walk. ☩

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This is revealing. I am not setting up the vertical *against* the horizontal. Both are present in Scripture; both are crucial. But I am concerned about this polarizing tendency in GMTC (and thus in accompaniment), where “life” most frequently, though not exclusively, indicates healthy *human* relationships.

Last summer, DGM’s international teaching theologians shared several mornings of conversation about accompaniment with DGM leadership. At one point, the theologians questioned the overly horizontal tone of the theme “reconciling and restoring human community” and the paucity of language concerning God’s reconciling the world to himself in Christ. “Well, of course, that is assumed,” was the answer. The theologians pointed out that this central affirmation may never merely be assumed as a known and a given.

Vocabulary in GMTC takes on new meaning. “The resurrection of Jesus is also God’s affirmation of Jesus’ way of mission in the world, a way of servanthood and commitment to struggle to bring life for others” (8). Here, resurrection affirms servanthood and struggle, rather than Christ’s victory over sin and death. The words “incarnational” and “cruciform” frequently appear, usually referencing not the Christ event, but rather our involvement on behalf of those who suffer and are oppressed. The latter is certainly a major theme in Scripture; but here even the vocabulary of the vertical has been coopted on behalf of the horizontal.

Evangelism in GMTC is highly visible but also somewhat muted and horizontal. “The Nature of God’s Mission” is described with ten headings, the first of which is “Evangelical.”² The Reformation understanding of good news primarily as justification is contrasted to the needs of today’s global church for “a variety of metaphors” (9). The list begins well, but soon flattens to “the affirmation of the value of human life in the face of economic materialism,...and the hope of transformation for those who seemingly have sold out to the gods of violence and war.”

Witness to people of other faiths is found not under evangelism, but rather in the section titled “Dialogical” (10): Although “Jesus is unknown to some people, God is already present in their lives and their religions.” Thus,

God desires that those who have already been touched by God’s presence and power might come to know the fullness of God’s life-saving power in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ....Conversations should encourage neighbors to acknowledge the power, beauty, and integrity found in each other’s faith.

Although traditional phrases are present here, this section suggests we evangelize merely so that those already knowing God may know him better. Is there discomfort with the admittedly exclusive claim that people alienated from God by sin must be reconciled *to God* through Christ? This might explain reference elsewhere to “so-called unreached people” (20).

I began by noting that sea changes have taken place in the churches of the South, and thus in global missions. But major changes have taken place in the

²The others: discipling, contextual, wholistic, transforming, dialogical, ecumenical, inclusive, local global, cruciformed.

North, as well. The passion—the fire in the belly—of many American and European churches has, at the national level (perhaps less often in the pew), moved away from an evangelical enterprise centered around justification and proclamation toward a more horizontal and social theology. Those who have made this move will find the focus of accompaniment and GMTC neither unfamiliar nor uncongenial. In many, if not most, of the churches of the South, however, the passion still lies with evangelism as traditionally construed, along with issues such as scriptural authority. Social statements of the North are already causing rifts.

Ironically, accompaniment and GMTC, in properly seeking to overcome divisions caused by power and wealth, may yet be found theologically inadequate by the most dynamic and growing churches of today, the churches of the South. ⊕

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