

Short Presentation for Workshop 5/Contribution Bernd Müller EKKW

"What does equal community mean in mission?"

For me it means enthusiasm where it works, challenge where we are on the way.

If we ask about our biblically based purpose, instigated by God's Spirit we are children of God and thus equal (Romans 8:14; 1 John 3). What is our mission? We participate in God's mission (missio Dei) through proclamation, dialogue and practical life, so that God's love may spread, creation be preserved, and peace and justice grow.

But we know: that is the theory. The practice in history and present often looks different. It seems that "eye level" and equality have remained a wonderful vision. Inequality begins with the fact that and how people are born with different starting conditions. The possibilities, the scope for shaping lives is unequally distributed. We know this.

If we look at our relationships with church partners and analyze our language, our thinking and our actions, we discover many disruptive factors on the way to an equal community in God's mission: there are paternalistic patterns in the way we deal with money; stereotypes in our language and in the interpretation of perceptions during mutual visits. We cultivate prejudices and images in our minds and are surprised that our partners also travel with images, stereotypes and prejudices. Especially in project work, we still have a long way to go before we can really speak of an equal community. How often do we try to convince our partners that they urgently need something before they have even expressed it? And then, when it comes to a project, we find it difficult to release or to let them take their own initiatives in the target country.

Decades of donor-recipient mentalities cry out for more mindfulness and a rethinking in view of what has changed since the one-sided missionary work of the 18th and 19th centuries: the so-called mission churches or "young churches" have become self-confident, in many cases independent and widely growing churches that have outgrown the recipient role. German or European churches are called upon to become sensitive to what for their part have been given, even if they do not yet really feel comfortable with the recipient role. But there are also good news! In my opinion, the United Evangelical Mission as a fellowship of almost 40 churches in three continents is a role model for what "being on the way in mission as equals" means. For 25 years, the fellowship has been growing not only in terms of its members, but also with each other on the way.

In my view, the appointment of an internationally mixed body to leadership positions has been good for the UEM, even if it has demanded a high degree of tolerance for the respective differences in mentality.

There are also good news from the changed experiences in the partnership relations worldwide, which in my opinion work more intensively with each other instead of going through similar visit programs with always new delegations. Thus, in times of globalization, they now also discuss in joint responsibility. They take on thematic visit or education programs, often with focus on one of the 17 UN development goals (Social Development Goals). Others, in a spirit of trust, share controversial views of biblical texts and do so in community of equals. There are not just a few partnerships that have set out to embed project work developmentally in an equal process of planning, monitoring, and evaluation, and this with professional assistance.

I dare to find something positive in the current, often paralyzing, pandemic situation: Despite all the horrors of this pandemic, Corona has had a catalytic function, namely in terms of a shared experience of threat, fear and crisis management - in many cases for the first time - but with significant differences in intensity and existential consequences! Our partners tell us that

it is new to experience how the "better-off world" also shares the global threat of the pandemic. We experience a new mutual solidarity: in the exchange of intercessions; in trying out digital participation formats. There is a new, simultaneous presence of partners in worship or partnership meetings on screen, more multilateral forms of expression. One-way streets have become mutual impulses. Christians reassure each other of their trust in God and weave "networks of concern," as our bishop, Dr. Beate Hofmann, puts it.

Will these new networks be sustainable in surely changed, analogue times we all are longing for?

From my point of view, it is up to all of us how mindful we deal with each other and check ourselves again and again where stereotypes, mentalities or simply the money from an intentionally equal community in the mission once again creates a power imbalance and produces crooked levels. Whether after a short time our view will again focus only on the direct partner instead of using the wealth of multinational networking for the equal community?

That would be a step backwards to times we thought we had said goodbye to.

My conclusion:

- Let us consciously celebrate encounters and experiences where we succeed in equal communion in global mission!

- Let us encourage each other to courageously analyse and remove faux pas, landmines and stumbling blocks on our way to more equality. Let us treat ourselves to further education and training in this regard, even if it relentlessly exposes what is unconsciously slumbering inside us (e.g. anti-bias training).

- Let's use the expertise of experienced people who have lived and worked in several contexts and challenge us to change our perspective.

It is always more helpful to adopt the much-vaunted "eye level" at least as a "maxim" than to ascribe to it a fairy tale quality from the outset. The fruits of experienced, equal community radiate and release positive energy. Let's make use of this!

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