

What does equal community mean in mission?

Keyword: "Equal"

In 2017, the NGO "glokal" published a text entitled "The fairy tale of eye level". It questions the postulated equality of partners in development cooperation. In the UEM, we often spoke of "eye level" prevailing between the member churches, in and between the three regions of the UEM. And indeed: since 1996, all 38 member churches and the von Bodelschwingh Foundations have been equal sponsors of the UEM, they all contribute financially to it, they manage it jointly and decide together on programs, orientations and finances in well-rehearsed processes and structures. That's eye level, isn't it? And all this is supposed to be a fairy tale?

I would like to strongly disagree. Yes, in many development organizations there is a difference between the donor and the recipient, between the advisor and the person being advised, between the learner and the teacher. But in the community-oriented structures of the UEM, there is a sense of eye level. On the other hand, is there really such a thing as eye level as a permanent condition? Don't the roles change constantly in every relationship? One needs help, the other gives it. One is exceptionally cheerful, the other is in a rather sad phase, but lets himself be infected by it. The Church, where yesterday there were great organizational difficulties, is today the model for many in dealing with poverty and overcoming it. It can be concluded: Eye level is not a static permanent state. Eye level is rather the possibility to be needy every now and then, but without being nailed down to this role for all times. Eye level means being able to be a strong and helpful advisor every now and then, but without claiming this role exclusively for oneself once and for all.

"The fairy tale of eye level"? Being equal means not always having to be at eye level. Rather, it means being able to put one's own weakness and one's own strength to the test again and again. And above all: to be able to switch between the two again and again, as the situation really demands! Only in this way does the so-called eye level come alive and not remain an artificial construct. The question is. Where are we questioners and seekers in our ecumenical relationships - and where would we like to pass on insights and experiences?

Keyword: "community"

The UEM grew from a German-based ministry working with partners to a community of members in 1996. This community is now 25 years old. Structures, communication, cooperation, all of this has come to fruition - and is constantly being adapted in order to really live up to the claim of being a community in three continents. Today, in 2021, the experience of the UEM and the member churches in Germany is urgently needed. In the last 25 years, they have learned to work together, to stimulate each other, to get upset - and to get upset again with each other, to argue and disagree, and to accept and live with differences. These are skills that our society needs! After all, about a quarter of the population - almost 19.3 million people in 2018 - have a so-called migration background or better: foreground In Wuppertal, for example, people from 160 nations live. And in our communities? Where can we find all these nations, these migration experiences, the different languages, habits, musical styles, cultures?

A church that is part of a worldwide community and whose congregations are predominantly white/middle-class oriented seems to split itself. In it, ecumenism seems to remain something foreign to everyday life, which does not really determine one's own reality, one's own everyday life. To be a worldwide community of churches can only mean to be a diverse

community and to seek diversity on all levels. Ecumenical fellowship must not remain only a concept for external relations - it must become the practice, the shaping feature of our everyday church life! The question is: What steps do we need to go further in this direction?

Keyword: "mission"

Mission has always meant crossing borders. That is its characteristic. Departure into the unknown, the unfamiliar, the uncertain. It is a very one-sided view that this has led to an image of mission as an accessory to colonialism in the German church world. Our colleagues from the South make it clear to us again and again that our discussions in Germany misjudge the power of mission and view it only very one-sidedly. Mission means that our faith is not a well-kept secret. It does not aim to create closed stores or secret societies with bizarre access requirements. Nor is our faith a secure space that gives us a comfortable feeling of home. Our faith challenges us again and again to seek new answers, to try out new ways. This is what we are called to do!

That's why we have to ask ourselves and let ourselves be asked: Where do we see uncharted territory? In the new social media? In the demands of the Black Lives Matter movements? In dealing with neighbors who seem very foreign to us? In a questioning of our lifestyles? In the unsettling experiences of the long-term unemployed? Our own insecurities should give us clues. That's where we have to go, as congregations, as groups, as individual Christians. Where we are uncertain and do not know exactly how our sentences or questions will sound.

Mission in this sense, understood as a departure, as an exploration of new relationships and cooperations, as a testing of new alliances - needs both: the community that does not assign fixed roles to anyone, and the diversity to which everyone not only simply belongs, but really forms and constitutes this community itself.

Angelika Veddeler

27. 05. 2021