

Reorienting Our Church's Work in the Fields of Ecumenical Affairs, Mission, Development Service, and Partnership

Oberkirchenrat Michael Martin

In 2006, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Bavaria engaged in a diverse discussion process on how to reorient their work concerning ecumenical affairs, mission, development service and partnership. We refer to it as "Field of Activity No. 6" and it is one topic of my responsibility in the church governing council. By the end of the year, we had set up the new Centre *Mission EineWelt*, proposed a new law regulating this field of activity, restructured the department for ecumenical affairs within our Central Church Office in Munich and drafted a policy paper on partnership. I think you can imagine the hard work that required and also our relief when at its session in the fall of 2006, the Synod unanimously voted to adopt the new law of ecumenical affairs and the position paper on the external relations of our church, the so called paper on partnership.

Still, our achievements to date have only taken us part of the way towards reorientation of our partnership efforts. Some fundamental decisions have been made. But now we are entering into a second, decisive phase: Reflecting together with you, our partners, on defining the content of our work. Let me use a metaphor: The field has been tilled. Now our task is to decide what to sow and when to sow it. This is where your experience and competency is vital, to ensure that our partnership efforts do not fail to meet our partners' needs.

My presentation aims at giving you some background and details on the individual steps towards this reorientation. I will also try to describe the state our – metaphorical – field is in and the work we have put into it. Later, we will present some questions to you, which we will work on together in small groups. This is when the sowing will come into focus.

1. Integrating Mission and Development Service

The Lutheran World Federation's document "Mission in Context" provided an important stimulus to our discussions on the relationship between mission and development work. We discussed this in detail with Dr Nordstokke on Tuesday. In this document, the LWF presents a broad understanding of mission, which opens up very promising perspectives but also risks relegating mission to the rank of some optional church activity. If anything that churches do is "mission", then ultimately, mission itself becomes invisible. Or I want to say it in brief: If everything is mission, mission is nothing. Therefore mission does need to have its own profile.

At the same time, mission means much more than that which we today call evangelization. Evangelization is the proclamation of the Gospel by preaching and sharing the Bible. It aims at conversion and baptism. In the past, this is what was meant by "mission", too. Whereas today, mission rather refers to credible ecclesial action, which brings people to faith. This includes evangelization as an important element, but not as the only element.

We asked ourselves what this understanding of mission means for partnership work. If mission in the broader sense means credible ecclesial action, then many aspects of partnership work fall within missional work: inter-church aid, supporting evangelization, mutual assistance in parish building, exchange of pastors – but also development projects to improve infrastructure and to meet people's basic needs.

Yet another aspect was relevant to our discussion: Experts on development, such as the Church Development Service (Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst - EED) in Bonn, emphasize that development work must not be made dependent on religious beliefs. This approach in and of itself is certainly valid: The offer to build water supply lines must not be subject to the condition that the local community accept to be baptized. Equally, Christians should not be the exclusive beneficiaries of church development work, because a strategy supporting only one group of a society would be lacking in vision and peacemaking potential. Still, in our church we are convinced that, in most societies outside of Germany, religion is such a core issue that it cannot simply be ignored. Therefore, church-based development work will frequently have to position it-

self in relation to questions of religion, which then of course will have to be done from a Christian perspective.

From this discussion, we in Bavaria drew the conclusion that, to ensure a well-defined missional profile of our partnership work, the fields of mission and development service need to be connected but not merged to the point of being one and the same. What is needed is an ongoing critical conversation between missionaries and development experts, which furthers credible church action and explains “mission” in the broader sense of the word.

Consistent with these thoughts, we integrated our formerly separate mission agency and church development service into one institution. In the process, it became obvious that the Latin America Desk, which had been based with the Central Church Office in Munich, also needed to be integrated into this structure. Because for our partnerships with the churches in Brasil and in Middle America mutuality between mission and development is also a key to ensure credible ecclesial action.

Finally, we also considered integrating cooperation with the Lutheran Churches in Eastern Europe, the last missing area of Lutheran partnership efforts, into this combined structure. It proved impossible, though, to open up this already very complex process to encompass another dimension. Also, there are technical reasons and factors on the project level that for the moment make leaving this section with the Central Church Office in Munich the appropriate choice.

2. Adoption of a New Law on Ecumenical Affairs, Mission, Development Service and Partnership

To enable integration of several fields of work within *Mission EineWelt*, our former law on ecumenism needed to be thoroughly reworked. Amending the law made us realize that the overall field of activity needed realignment, as the amendments impacted upon the Central Church Office’s work, our decision-making structures, the way project work is organized and the interlinkage of these activities with the church’s congregations and institutions. All of this needed to be discussed when we

were preparing the draft law. What we came up with is included at the end of the *Communio* booklet. Unfortunately, unlike the main section, this text is in German only.

Let me give you a summary of those aspects of the law, which are of relevance to you, our partners:

- Work in the field of ecumenical affairs, partnerships, mission and development service is, in accordance with our Constitution, described as mark and vital manifestation of our church. This means that this field must not be given lower priority than other fields, either in terms of funding decisions or strategic planning. The relevance of this statement for you as our partners is rooted in its fundamental commitment to reliable cooperation.
- Partnership work in our church is described to be a task for all levels of church life: congregation, deanery, district and the church as a whole. Groundedness of this work in the various levels is explicitly called for and the desire is expressed that it be enhanced wherever possible. Partnership work as well as ecumenical affairs rely on networks of coordinators who are in charge of promoting these activities in their deaneries.
- The law explicitly lists three institutions bearing executive responsibility: The *Handlungsfeldkonferenz* as the key decision-making body in this field of activity, the Center *Mission EineWelt*, the responsibilities of which have been elaborated upon already, and the Central Church Office in Munich – specifically, my own department – which is in charge of overall implementation of all aspects related to this field of activity (including supervision of *Mission EineWelt*), and which also handles relations with Christian world communions, other denominations and other religions.

The law was unanimously adopted by the Synod at its fall session of 2006. One reason for this doubtlessly lies in the synod's being involved in the drafting and given appropriate space in the text itself.

On January 14, 2007, we inaugurated the Centre *Mission EineWelt* here in Neuen-dettelsau with many of you participating in this event. Other German mission agencies and churches have shown strong interest in this idea of integrating mission and

development, which is well reflected in the name “*Mission EineWelt*.” A few critical voices have been heard, though, including the Evangelical Development Service in Bonn, a service agency of the Evangelical Church in Germany. Discussion on our understanding of mission and development is in full swing.

3. A New Policy on Partnership Work

After talking about such rather uninspiring structural facts, let me now give you some information on the reflections concerning the content of our partnership efforts, which arose from this process. These reflections were well summarized and published in a document entitled “External relations of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria,” which has been distributed to you. You have also received an English translation of the main section of this document, which I would like to refer to in the following.

This partnership document attempts to define our understanding of partnership by means of attentively listening to our partners. It is intended to offer guidance on how to build relations with your churches to all those active in partnership work. It is also intended to introduce you to our theology of partnership.

Under number 2.1 on page 5 of the English text, bishop Kigasung is quoted defining partnership as „walking side by side“, a phrase that mirrors its dynamic, open character. Number 2.2 refers to the British missiologist Max Warren, who, in a similar perspective, wrote: “The Christian Church as the New Testament presents it is intended to be an adventure in partnership.” In conclusion, some fundamental principles of partnership are listed, which, though dynamic by nature, can be retained for their universal applicability: priority to reciprocal visits, a time perspective for at least several years, cooperation „on the same footing“, main focus on exchange of experience, knowledge, intellectual resources and personnel, social context of partner churches as a shared challenge.

Partnership work in the church is rooted in values that are anti-cyclical to developments brought about by economic globalization. Short-lived trends and fashions are counterbalanced by reliability. Intensive sharing and accompaniment provide an al-

ternative to the shallowness promoted by our general culture. Exploitation and an increasing focus on individual well-being find their response in long-term solidarity and support for those in need. “Another world is possible”, the World Social Forum motto, is referred to under 2.4. In the context of partnership work, this sentence turns into a theological confession.

The various histories of our partnerships necessitate some differentiation within such a partnership policy. This is done under 2.5. The intention here is not to describe various forms of partnership carved in stone, but rather to offer a discussion starter. Might examples of positive experiences using partnership agreements encourage other partners to consider concluding similar agreements? Do evaluations of partnership work scheduled at specific intervals not present advantages in terms of expressing equality and the possibility for all partners to initiate change?

Questions of this kind are listed at the end of chapter 1 (under number 1.5). Please kindly take a close look at these questions and give us your feedback, so we can hopefully engage in a long-term discussion.

Section 3 of the policy paper fleshes out what partnership work is meant to be. Let me highlight section 3.3, which deals with ecumenical learning. Herein lies the essence of partnership work, its lifeline, providing fertile ground on which to nurture vibrant relationships.

- It is of greatest importance to us to get theological, spiritual and structural inspiration from your growing churches, some of which are still young. Such inspiration needs to deeply impact ecclesial life in our congregations. This is one liturgical dimension of partnership.
- It is important to us to understand, together with you, that our life style and the social situation in many of your countries are directly related. Only together with you we can speak out on questions of globalization in a credible way. This is the prophetic dimension of partnership.
- And we want to continue helping to build up churches and societies by means of development projects and projects of ecumenical diakonia. This is the diac-
onal dimension of partnership.

Please consider this document to be a summary of the results of our discussion in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Bavaria. None of it is final, none of it is carved in stone. Everything can be questioned and discussed. As I said earlier, we have tilled our field. What is to grow needs to be determined by all of us together. We can start this discussion now during this consultation.

4. Church Leadership Consultations

Let me add some more information on the issue of church leadership consultations, which we want to take up in the group discussions starting at 11:15. We have been organizing such consultations for many years with our partner churches in Latin America and in Hungary. In addition to opportunities for networking at the implementation level, these consultations also offer a platform for intensive strategic planning at the level of church leaders. This setup has produced very good results. Every two years or so, representatives of the leading bodies of the churches – bishops, church presidents, members of church governing councils and synods – meet in a group that is small enough to be very efficient. They discuss the state of the partnerships concerned, core challenges and opportunities, current priorities, and funding options.

The law I introduced you to earlier makes explicit mention of these consultations. They are conducted by the Central Church Office, that is, by my team and me, and the agenda is prepared together with the responsible executing desks.

We would be happy to also hold such consultations with those of our partner churches who have not been involved in them as yet. This could further strengthen cooperation between our church leaderships. However, from an organizational as well as financial point of view it is not possible for us to organize two-year bilateral consultations with each of the partners present today, as that would mean eight consultations a year.

Moreover, working multilaterally is indeed what is needed. That is why we planned this initial consultation at this global level.

Therefore, Dorothea Droste and Thomas Prieto Peral, in consultation with Wolfgang Döbrich, Reinhard Hansen and Traugott Farnbacher, *Mission EineWelt* secretaries for overseas relations, have developed a first proposal as to how such consultations might be structured in future. Here is what they are suggesting:

- Consultations are helpful, as they hold church leaders accountable and offer the secretaries for overseas relations the opportunity to resolve pending issues by means of face-to-face contacts.
- Latin America brings its positive experiences of planning and holding bilateral consultations to the process.
- Papua/Pacific/East Asia and Africa apply positive experiences from the Joint Boards.

The following combination is proposed:

- Visits-consultations could be organized overseas. These would emphasize BILATERAL relations and deal with questions concerning the respective church relationship.
- Regional consultations could be held in Bavaria (Papua/Pacific/East Asia, Africa, Latin America), emphasizing MULTILATERAL relations and focusing on policy issues (diakonia, mission, education/training etc.).
- Membership in the existing Joint Boards is not affected and will be maintained on the level of individual desks as has been the case to date.

We would now like to proceed by way of three steps: First we will have a plenary discussion on my presentation. Then, from 15:30, small groups will focus on the proposed consultation model. In the afternoon, we will ask you again to work in groups to identify priority issues of our work that should be dealt with by the consultations. Thomas Prieto Peral will then explain further details.

But at first thank you very much for your attention. I look forward to constructive discussions.

Questions for Discussion – Small Group Session 1

- How much importance do you attach to church leadership consultations? Do they/would they contribute to furthering our partnership work?
- In your opinion, how should future church leadership consultations be organized?

Questions for Discussion – Small Group Session 2

- In your church, are there any discussions on the relationship between mission and development?
- In your region, which are the key issues that should be discussed bilaterally or multilaterally?
- Which of these issues should be dealt with in the context of consultations, which by means of other instruments of church work?