

Mental change of the own staff

Experiences with the internationalisation process of an evangelical mission society

an interview with Fidon Mwombeki

Timo Kiesel: What meant internationalisation of United Evangelical Mission (UEM)?

Fidon Mwombeki: There were changes in financing and programs, in decision-making and work methods. We call it internationalization of UEM. Today the budget is contributed by all churches in Germany, Africa and in Asia. The majority is still from Germany, because the member churches contribute according to their capacity and receive according to their needs. But now we finance programs in Africa, Asia and as well in Germany. As well we have new governing bodies—the Management Team, the council and the Assembly with members from all three regions. Therefore also the co-workers are from all three regions. Basically the whole decision-making as well as the staff was changed. In 1996, the first moderator, who is the chairperson of the council and the general assembly, was from Asia. And the one who followed was from Africa. And now, the moderator is from Germany for the last seven years. Next year will be elected a new moderator. A rotation is wanted. We used to have three working languages: German, English and French. But in 2010 there was the decision that the working meetings of the governing bodies were going to be in English only. Why? Because, first of all English is not a mother tongue of any of our members. But it's the one which is understood by people from all countries. The employment in the UEM office in Wuppertal is now opened for people from Africa and Asia. However, we all learned German in order to work here, just as we offer language training for all who go to work in the other continents, also from Germany. So we offer nine month of language training before employment. So, when I was employed in Germany as a secretary of department, I spent six month, fully paid, full time, learning German.

Timo Kiesel: What difficulties did come along this process?

Fidon Mwombeki: Definitely it's more costly than if you keep staying in one country. If you want to have this intercultural, international organisation, you must be ready to invest in it. There needs to be a mental change within the organisation in all directions. Until now, I observe, that it's not easy for people of member churches in Africa and Asia to understand and accept UEM as now international and therefore themselves having responsibility to finance it, to regard it not as something coming from Germany, but part of us. This is still a long time process which is going on. In the same way in Germany I see people that haven't changed their minds to think they are not only donors but a communion doing things together where they also need to learn to receive.

Timo Kiesel: How do you challenge this mental change?

Fidon Mwombeki: We think it evolves by having different people in different places and activities. Many people have prejudices, because of ignorance. I have worked in Tanzania, in Sweden, in America and in Germany. I know that the mentality, the type of people you get, as a leader, the types of problems you have to deal with, regardless of where you are, they are the same. You have lazy people, you have hard working people. There is still the idea of Germans are hardworking people and Africans are lazy. It is just a cliché. There are lazy Germans, there are people who don't deliver, just as there are lazy Africans and lazy Asians. Germans don't agree with that, they are surprised and think they are so great. They don't like me to tell them that this is not true.

Timo Kiesel: What is UEM doing to fight these stereotypes besides workshops about anti-racism and critical whiteness?

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Fidon Mwombeki: This is an ongoing act; the management must always be sensitive that if you're working on something which is not so common in our environment, you must be very aware and intentional in keeping it. We made this very voluntarily. Those who are participating are discovering hidden, undiscovered stereotypes which they have in mind. And I think on all sides, on the foreigners as well as on the Germans. The initial idea came from a group of Germans who had some experiences and they are running this training. It has our support as management team, but we deliberately decided not to make it a mandatory training which can have its own also negative results, if you force it. And particularly because some might think it is from me as an African General Secretary, which is not the case at all.

Timo Kiesel: Is there an idea of empowering churches in the global South?

Fidon Mwombeki: We engage the African and Asian churches to stop this thinking of inferiority, when they are working in relation to Europeans, when they position themselves as receivers. When they are working among themselves they are very generous and they donate a lot of money. But when it comes to foreigners in the north, then they, all of a sudden, are very poor. The message is: You have to turn from thinking of yourselves as receivers and actually give, because they have more, they can do more, and they are doing more, but not when there is cooperation with the northern people. We try this with our fundraising, through a big campaign, we call it United Action. We published a small booklet of church projects from all three continents which people may choose from. And what was surprising to us, there are several churches in Asia, especially Indonesia, which chose to support a project from Wuppertal church, which supports children from lower income families to have a meal, which I find excellent. Now there are some projects in Germany which are funded by money from African and Asian churches. Doesn't matter how much money it is, but the mentality, I think, changes this way. What will people in Germany say when they know that a little church in Westpapua, Indonesia, has also contributed money and sent it to Wuppertaler Stadtmission, in order to help children with their homework in Wuppertal. And how are they going to receive it? I'm really looking forward to see, because the Germans have to learn to receive. I have posed this question to Germans: What would happen if you plan to close your Kindergarten because you don't have enough money and there is a rich congregation in Jakarta, of which there are many, and they want to finance it for the next five years. Will you keep it open? And they told me: No, that would be difficult. I said: why? If you can't receive, then you have to ask yourself why you give. And it's equally the same problem in the South whose mentality is: we are receivers, we have nothing, we are underdeveloped and we need support from the north. You have to challenge their minds and convince them.

Timo Kiesel: Is it possible to work on eye level within partnership of people from the global north and south?

Fidon Mwombeki: I think it's happening, but still in process. People have not changed totally in their attitudes towards the other. But I can see in the UEM, there's a deliberate attempt to do that. And they, of course, encounter hindrances, all the clichés and everything. But they are conscious of them. They try at least not to decide for others, not to pressurize others, not to underestimate others or overestimate others. There are constant attempts, sometimes successful, sometimes not. People used to travel to visit their partners and have a seminar or some projects. But we discovered that there is need to facilitate training beforehand to tackle stereotypes and unequal relations. Then we invested in trainings in our house in Wuppertal. But we offered the training only to Germans who as usual, prepare themselves well before anything. We discovered they always went to meet their partners who have had no similar training at all. That is unequal start. Now we have changed that and employ people to give trainings in our regional offices in the different countries. That was an imbalance which we are now trying to correct. We tried to provide a handbook with guidelines for partnerships.

Timo Kiesel: Would you call the UEM a decolonized mission organisation? Is it even possible?

Fidon Mwombeki: Internationalized, I would say. We don't use the decolonization language as such, but we

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call it international. Next year we celebrate the internationalization of UEM It is because I think mission work was sometimes definitely colonial, but not as such. I have sharp differences with several people who think mission was part of colonization project. At least in the case of UEM it was not. There is a program as part of the EKD in general tackling the role of the church in colonialism in Southern Africa for example. It's based on our archive and museum foundation. They have now finished the huge documentary of the role of the churches and missions in the colonial times in and racism in South Africa especially. It was actually located in UEM but was mainly financed by EKD and other mission organisations. The results show that there were definitely colonial mentalities, even in the mission itself. For example they decided to hand over the mission in South Africa, because it was not progressing. They treated people like a company and sold it to the Dutch reformed mission. If you see the comments of the mission director from Wuppertal about those people, they are definitely racist.

Fidon Mwombeki is a Tanzanian evangelical priest and missionary. At United Evangelical Mission, a communion of churches in Asia, Africa and Germany, he used to be consultant for mission and evangelization; from 2006 to 2015 he filled the position of general secretary. Since 2009 he is member of Rat der Evangelischen Kirchen in Deutschland. Currently he manages the department of mission and development at Lutheran World Federation in Geneva.