

# History and Vision of United in Mission

## Introduction presented at Ramatea, 12 October 1993

### WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

When representatives of VEM foster churches in Germany and representatives of VEM partner churches in Asia and Africa met at the Consultation in Bethel in 1978, something valuable happened. In reflecting on the 150th Jubilee events of Mission (Rhenish and Bethel) the consultation was certainly the most important event. It is important, because the representatives of the VEM foster and partner churches have taken steps which lead to the assembly at Ramatea. There are at least three things worth noting:

a. By coining the word United in Mission, they all not only confirmed their common roots, but also strengthened their relationship to those roots, namely Mission;

b. by committing themselves to United in Mission they all accepted a common calling based on equal footing, which later on can be a strong basis on which they stand and grow together;

c. by choosing to be united instead of separated, they re-confirmed the need and the importance of being united when it comes to proclaiming the Gospel to the world, when it comes to Mission. The key word was, and still is, "growing together". Both the foster churches and the partner churches must grow together by knowing each other better, venturing joint programmes and trying to share the common responsibility. The most promising thing in this early stage of being together was the at-

tempt to make the South-South relationship functional. In spite of so many difficulties, including lack of experience and absence of any special instrument in the South to handle the programme, the attempts were encouraging, enriching and should be developed.

Ten years later, in 1988, at the Mülheim Consultation, the representatives of the VEM foster churches and the partner churches came to an agreement that the growing together, united in mission, should be structured. It was logical. From 1978 to 1988 the work of United in Mission was carried out by VEM - a purely German organisation. In growing together and also in the decision-making process the representatives saw the need to give structures to this process, where growing together based on equal footing, sharing together in programmes and financial burden, and venturing into new joint programmes would be possible. The draft of the structure was submitted to the Ramatea assembly for consideration. The questions to answer when adopting this constitution are the following:

- Does this structure accommodate our common history and, at the same time, enable the process of growing together into a witnessing fellowship? (Kindly note the different times and ways in which each of our churches joined the stream of common history.)

- Does this structure reflect equality, based on equal footing with respect to tasks and responsibilities, within a

macro-structure which reflects grave disparity?

- At least, does this structure support the quest to strive for balance (equality, equilibrium) among the churches, following 2 Corinthians 8:15, "He/she who gathered much had nothing left over, and he/she who gathered little had no lack"? So that at the end each of our church could be "self-reliant"?

- Does this structure replace any other structure which was a burden, therefore enabling your churches to carry out their mission more fully? Or will this structure add an extra burden for your church?

- Should not the structure accommodate the experience of church circuit partnerships and the participa-

tion of co-workers in other countries?

- Is this the structure which could be afforded by your church, so that growing together based on equal footing is really possible?

These and similar questions should be raised and answered by this Assembly before it adopts the constitution. In other words, the rules and by-laws which bind us legally and spiritually together. Any other relevant questions should be raised and answered, so that when this Assembly takes action, which respectively will be forwarded to all the churches for final ratification, we do it consciously and responsibly. No question is ever too late to raise nor too difficult to answer, if we want to have a





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proper and viable, bearable and useful structure.

### DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

In order to be able to raise the right questions when considering the constitution, and more importantly, in order to be able to find the right answers, we need to survey briefly the signs of this age. In Matthew 16:1-3, Jesus urges all His followers throughout the ages to recognise the signs of their own times, "to know what is going on right now" (Luke 12:56). Being aware of the signs of the age, Jesus' followers always will know what must be done and proclaimed, according to their calling. That is also our hope. By understanding the signs of this age, we hope to be able to form the steps which we will take together into the future, being always united in mission.

#### *Travelling towards the end of everything*

Scientists help us understand the signs of this age. We get this from their analysis in which they describe future trends. From the many signs of the times, we note several important ones. First, at this moment we are approaching the year 2000. We are approaching the end of the 20th century and the second millennium and we expect the arrival of the 21st century and the third millennium. In religious circles, there often emerges a group which relates the end of a millennium to the end of



everything. Such enthusiastic people will proclaim that the end of time is near. For us, the reality of coming to the end of this millennium is also a reminder of our linear understanding of time, and thus reminds us that we are travelling towards the end of everything. For that reason we must continue to improve our readiness to welcome that end. Of equal importance with the awareness of the end, which is certain and coming ever closer, is discerning the problems which will influence human life in the new century and millennium. For only by understanding the global problems which influence human life can the churches pointedly and rele-

vantly deliver the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people who live in the midst of those problems. Our knowledge of these problems is decisive, particularly in our holistic understanding of mission.

#### *The Rich and the Poor*

Second: We also live under the shadow of the signs of this age which reveals the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The widening of this gap is not only limited at the North-South level, but also exists in almost every country, particularly in the third world. This trend not only exacerbates social relations in all kinds of ways, but also threatens peace and the integrity of creation. The

*Important steps forward: The Assemblies of VEM partner churches in Bethel 1978 (p. 14) and Mülheim 1988 (p. 15)*

process, in any country, by which poverty becomes more widespread, nearly escapes our attention. According to the experts, without basic changes, this development will continue to worsen - meaning that the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to widen. Creating these basic changes is by no means easy. In this regard, it must be noted that apart from these basic changes, which are greatly needed by the world economic order, the World Council of Churches has repeatedly called all of its member churches to review and change their life-style, which has already been established according to the existing world economic order. The wide-

ning of the gap between the rich and the poor is also directly reflected in the life of our churches. The economic existence of our churches is the reflection of the economic existence of our respective societies (cf. Jeremiah 29:7).

In light of this bad situation, our churches are challenged to be committed to achieving equality, and not drift on the current of compromise with this global trend. We face this challenge directly when we discuss the constitution. Can the UIM located in Germany be a place to seek balance? Further, can UIM become an instrument for seeking balance? We have to face this challenge openly and honestly, because, to use the language of Jeremiah, the VEM foster churches are apparently living in the lap of a society which continues to become richer and richer, while the VEM partner churches are in the lap of societies which struggle severely to free themselves from the strangle of poverty. Freedom from poverty is an integral part of the mission efforts of the church. Therefore, we must pay attention to this trend. It is not an easy task, because it is complicated by two other things: On the one hand we tend to accept the reality, but on the other hand, the threat of materialism in the life of churches becomes greater and greater as a result of both the slowness of spiritual growth and the very influential advertisement expansion, which is very exciting and materialistic in its essence. For instance: Does a

UIM co-worker, maintaining an office in Wuppertal, receive the same salary and social security benefits as well as enjoying facilities as a German co-worker in a similar organisation? The salary and social security benefits concerned are known to be ten times or more greater than in his/her original country. The office and other facilities will cost also the same. We have to face this kind of questions openly and honestly, and we have to courageously give new answers which reflect our determination together, finding new alternatives, if possible. Our churches are called to witness amidst this trend, and we are challenged to decide the form of our common witness.

### *„Global gladiators“*

Third: Because it is closely related to the trend of the widening gap between the rich and the poor, it is interesting to mention Sociologist Alvin Toffler's analysis, in his book, "Power Shift" (1990), which investigates also the rise of



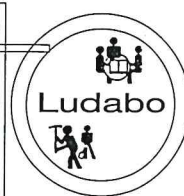
the "global gladiators" trend in the coming 21st century. History has gone through a shift from violence to wealth, and now from wealth to knowledge. Apart from showing the greater role of knowledge as power in the future, considering the present trends, Toffler predicts that the 21st century will be dominated by powers which go beyond the limits and sovereignty of the nation-state, and which he calls "global gladiators". He quotes, as an example, "the empire of cocaine" which reveals the power of marijuana trade shaking the states; "the dispersed oppressor", which describes the power of mega-firms dictating the world economy; "the corporate condottiere" describing the possibility of the gigantic industries forming

*The delegates in front of the conference hall in Ramatea*

their own mercenaries to obtain the security of their trade stream. But the most interesting is the mention of "the resurrection of religion" in the first order. By giving the example of Khomeini ordering the death penalty of the British author Salman Rushdie, Toffler notes the trend of religion dictating what the citizens of other equally sovereign nations could or could not read. This would be the same as the Roman Catholic Pope calling to form a "Christian Europe": Religion disregarding national and religious boundaries. "The emerging global power game in

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the decades ahead cannot be understood without taking into account the rising power of Islam, Catholicism, and other religions, or global conflicts and holy wars among them" (p 452). For us, this trend strengthens our awareness that the church as the salt and the light of the world must take into account its influence and life in its environment. What we mean, first and uppermost, is the spiritual influence of our commitment for United in Mission - initially in the middle of our respective nations, and then amidst our nations as a whole. We surely are not called to be the gladiators of the 21st century. But we cannot close our eyes towards the challenge which, in itself, expects from the church that which cannot be gained from other organisations. And in this case, our United in Mission fellowship must be clearly an integral part of the world ecumenical movement and fellowship.

## *Secularism*

Fourth: While the North enjoys fast progress in almost all aspects, and its citizens enjoy bountiful lives, we note the influence of secularism permeating the life of churches in the North. The consequence of this secularism is of great concern in the life of the younger generation. Even though most of the children are baptised and confirmed in the church, even though most Christians still wish to be married in the church and/or buried by the church, and even though there are many efforts to

seek alternative forms of worship, it cannot be denied that the secularism which spreads throughout Europe is an unmatched challenge for the churches in the North. The exodus from the church and church membership, by self-proclamation, not only reduces the church income, but also challenges all the existing theologies and the proclamation of the Gospel. How can the Gospel be proclaimed to those who abdicate church membership every year in great numbers? Could they possibly remain Christian, but reject the inheritance of the institution to which they are attached? Can they just be 'floating' Christians without institution, as predicted by Naisbitt in his book, "Megatrends"? According to Naisbitt, as the mainstream churches in America continue to lose members, the number of Christian groups which do not want to be bound to the inherited institution will continue to increase. Or, by abandoning official church membership, are they actually confirming their previous attitude of not expecting anything from the church except as a tradition or a social obligation? What is clear is that they are still the addressees of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with the note that they have just left the church.

*VEM-director Rev. Reiner Groth addressing the Assembly*

Our missionary concern for them certainly demands that we rethink the content and agenda of the church proclamation, and at the same time rethink that we should create a structure in which institutionalism and bureaucracy should not hinder people to hear the Gospel and to join the fellowship of believers. And in relation to that, we need to note that in ancient days the Gospel was preached from Jerusalem to Rome, and from among the



society of the poor to the affluent, from a more backward environment to that which was more developed. The Gospel is generally proclaimed by the ordinary people to the people who are more educated, from those who have moved from a primordial culture (Judaism) to modern culture (Hellenistic). This is often repeated in history. (The history of VEM and its predecessors is different. It is the other way round.) But the situation we are facing in the North demands new initiatives which could be successful if dealt with jointly and imaginatively.

## *Fundamentalism and Ethnic identity*

Fifth: There are two phenomena which are different, although similar in their appearance: Namely, the rise of fundamentalism in all world religions, and the rise of ethnic identity - both seeking to solve problems by violence and war. In this situation, the message of each religion, and the life style of its followers are put to the test. Meanwhile, the rise of ethnic identity, which demands freedom, is a result of the awareness of the meaning of freedom itself. It is here that the church is challenged to demonstrate whether or not it can transform divisive ethnic fanaticism. In the growth of our churches' faith, we must be warned not to fall into primordialism and fundamentalism. Falling into fundamentalism is a sign of deadlock. In the growth of faith, our churches must continuously struggle with the dynamic relationship of the Gospel and culture, so that our churches can witness more convincingly and attract more attention in this time and in this world. If our churches are concerned with the raging of war and physical conflict in various places, because of these two phenomena, then our churches must start within themselves to overcome the phenomena. The challenge which some of our churches face is how to grow from an ethnic church in a homogeneous society into a church for all, irrespective of their background.

## GLOBAL CHALLENGES

### *Population explosion*

Having surveyed briefly the future trends, we need to note the challenges that are directly related to them, and to our churches. According to Paul Kennedy, in his book "Preparing for the Twenty-first Century" (1993), the first and most important of these trends is the surge in the earth's population and the rising imbalances between rich and poor countries (p 33). The description of population explosion, together with its consequences, is really gloomy. Without extraordinary actions, according to the author and some experts, the explosion of world population will reach an additional one billion every decade. In its turn, this will cause a food crisis. Despite the improvements in food production, there is clearly uncertainty about the outcome of the leapfrog race between population growth and agricultural production. In addition, this population explosion has an impact on the environment. For example: 14 percent of India is currently covered by forest, compared with over 50 percent last century. Forty years ago, Ethiopia had a 30 percent forest cover, which has now shrivelled to a mere one percent.

Global communication has brought changes. It breaks state monopolies on information, permeates national boundaries, allowing people to hear and see how others do things differently. It has

also made richer and poorer countries more aware of the gap between them in a way that was not possible half a century ago, and stimulated legal and illegal migration.

To our churches, joined in United in Mission, which exist in the two worlds, this population explosion presents a twofold challenge: On the one hand, we are challenged to ask how the church can equip its members to be able to develop responsible parenthood and family planning, and, on the other hand, how the church can influence those around it to participate in developing family planning. So clearly, our churches cannot ignore this trend. All consequences of the population explosion will also influence the church. Moreover, if the population expansion can threaten the long term existence of humankind itself, then the church is called with all it can to help prevent it. It is also an integral part of its mission.

### *Education*

Closely related to the prevention of the population explosion is the importance of education improvement and the urgency of improving the status and role of women. Actually, social thinkers (from Wells to Toynbee) have long and repeatedly argued that global society is in a race between education and catastrophe. And those stakes are higher at the century's



end simply because population pressures which promote environmental damage and humankind's capacity to inflict mass destruction are all greater. Educational improvement, which has to include the national system for training and retraining, must be done. Great investment in education will guarantee better development. Experts also note the close relationship between women's education, or adult female literacy rate, and the total fertility rate.

## OUR CHALLENGE TODAY

Having understood those great challenges, let us see the direction of our walking together. We still have to grow together in the sense that we have to continue to get to know each other better, so that in our attempts to

understand the challenges we face in our respective countries we can develop our witnessing fellowship. We need to formulate together what we possibly can and what we realistically must do together, in order to fulfil our calling as United in Mission. We need to make use of the structure which will help us grow together and carry our joint witness. It is in facing this heavy task that we will grow more mature, and, in turn, be better able to face such heavy challenges. May the Lord help us.

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