

Partnerships between cheerleaders and brake pads

The partnerships get underway

To understand the role of the partnership movement in the context of the internationalization of UEM, it is necessary to briefly recall the history of the partnership movement:

The partnership movement was not an idea of the church as an institution or of the various missionary societies at the time. It emerged as a movement of people in the Global North about 40-50 years ago who sought contacts in the Global South that were to be based on equality. They no longer wanted sponsorships; they opposed the paternalism that prevailed in the churches and also in many missionary societies at the time. And from the very beginning, the question of power was also raised in this movement. Can you be partners when one comes from the rich Global North and the other from the poor Global South? What can common ground look like if the question of power is not always clarified? This is a fundamental question that must be clarified again and again in the partnership movement to this day. This process is still ongoing.

The train of internationalization is put on track – the idea of internationalizing the UEM takes shape

In the process of internationalizing the UEM, this very question of power was clearly raised by a mission organization, the UEM, and thus took up the ideas of the partnerships. Many partnerships support the idea and, especially in the German member churches, became promoters or, to stay with the image, cheerleaders for internationalization. Just when many critical questions were being asked about internationalization in the German member churches, the partnerships that existed in all German member churches until internationalization strongly supported internationalization. They were the model and the basis for internationalization. It would be very interesting to examine the role of the partnerships in this process more closely.

The train is leaving the station – and in which carriage are the partnerships sitting?

Partnership work now had to find a place in the new structure. This was and still is not easy, and the places have often changed.

Was it a separate car, as at the beginning of internationalization, as a separate department in UEM, or was partnership work later, since 2003, assigned to one or more carriages? Since internationalization, partnership work has been anchored in almost all departments within the UEM. It had to be quite flexible and change places from time to time. But perhaps this is also fitting for a movement that cannot be captured in structures.

What happened next is important: the Partnerships and Projects Committee very soon became the Partnerships Committee. This showed that partnerships did not want to be limited to projects.

In 2005, the first and so far only major evaluation of all partnerships took place, culminating in the first International Partnership Conference in 2007. This conference developed the partnership guidelines. These guidelines spelled out the internationalization of the partnerships in detail.

No matter where we are, we are involved – sometimes as a stumbling block

Further International Partnership Conferences followed (2012, 2017, 2024), which increasingly sharpened the profile of the partnerships with regard to internationalization. The focus was increasingly on concrete action and less on theory.

South/South partnerships emerged, trilateral partnerships gave the partnerships new impetus, and new forms of thematic partnerships emerged. The focus was always on doing and trying out international partnerships.

The drive for internationalization of the UEM was fuelled when the Partnership Committee of the German region prepared and held the Thematic Conference of the German region in 2012 and made racism and paternalism in the German region the topic of discussion. Today, this topic has a firm place in the UEM.

At times, the partnerships, especially in the German region, moved too quickly. This was evident in the heated discussion in 2022 about the board's statement on power relations in church partnerships. It was not easy to recognize that, despite all efforts, paternalistic structures still exist in partnerships.

This led to various decisions in partnership work, e.g., that round tables would only be held with all partners or that country seminars would now be organized internationally. This went too fast for some partnership activists and there was resistance.

... and where are we headed?

Partnerships are still a movement that is constantly seeking new places in the wake of internationalization, cannot always be captured by structures, and are important fellow travellers with a lot of passion who should not be left behind at a train station. The UEM needs these movers and shakers, as motivators and sometimes also as a brake pad for the next 30 years.

Frauke Bürgers, UEM Partnership Officer (2010 -2017 and 2019-2015)