

Interview with Rev. Dr Fidon Mwombeki on March 2, 2022 via Zoom

The Tanzanian theologian and missionary first came to the Mission House in Wuppertal in 2005 from the Northwest Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania as head of the Evangelism Department before becoming general secretary of the UEM between 2006 and 2015. During his ten-year stay in Germany, he was a member of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany from 2009 to 2015. Mwombeki also served on the board of Oikocredit for six years, including as president from 2010 to 2012. In 2016, he moved to the Lutheran World Federation. Since 2018, Fidon Mwombeki has been general secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), based in Nairobi, Kenya, and thus head of an organization representing more than 120 million Christians in Africa.

The following questions were asked by Martina Pauly, UEM press officer.

Mr. Mwombeki, colonialists and missionaries are often mentioned in the same breath in Germany. Is this justified in your view?

Simply said, no. Although I think I was saying this many times in Germany, speaking as an African, especially even now working with African churches, not only the UEM related, but more. Therefore, I have chapters from countries with different histories of colonialism, French, English and others, not only churches, but even communities.

No, there was a big difference between colonialists and missionaries. There are many things you can see, for example, where the people stay, all colonialists live in cities where they had their administration, but most missionaries didn't stay in cities. They went into the villages wherever they could find acceptance. And when they reached there, they built stations to live there. They didn't teach their home language, but they learned the language of the local people. So the German or English or whoever missionaries didn't teach people German. They learned the native language, whether it's Kihaya or whichever. They even tried to formulate the alphabet and make it written because all of it was not written.

So if you see how much investment and time and energy and money they spent to understand the cultures, to understand the language of the people and live with them, go into their homes, eat with them it's because they had passion in their hearts. They saw these fellow human beings created in the image of God. And these missionaries loved these people. There were no missionaries in general, who grabbed land and owned it. They didn't. If they had any plantation or anything, it did not belong to them, it belonged to the churches which they founded.

Those are some of the differences. And some even chose to be buried there where they had lived and worked because they felt they are just the same with these people. But the colonialists went and left and we have never invited them back. But even at the end of colonialism, even during the *Zeitgeist* of independence, the missionaries were always invited until today. They are welcomed, they were invited, they stayed with them and they lived where the people are. So that is better and different. They had no material ambitions, but they had the genuine concern of developing the people. That's why mission stations, even in the times of war or independence, were exempted to be attacked by the local people because they knew these are not the same. We are not fighting these ones. And if you go and see the graves, how we respect the graves where they are buried, until today, even if they won't be respected in their own countries. It's because of the gratefulness. You don't respect the grave of someone who oppressed you, you don't even want to see it. But when it comes to the graves of missionaries you will see it in all over the place that we see a very big distinction between the goals of colonialists and the goals of missionaries.

Something else which I have come to realize that is true, colonialism helped missionaries with the protection by the colonial administration and things like this. Like we know today that if certain visitors or even church people, when they go to a certain country, they go to the embassy of their home country to identify themselves. And maybe if there is a consular need, this was provided by the colonial administration.

But we have to remember that it was not always the same. For example, most active missionaries did not come from the colonial countries. It was not an automatic thing that if it's a German colony, then you have German missions or if it's a Dutch colony, then you have Dutch missions. You might have more. But there are so many places where these missionaries went to where they really had no colonial support and their country was never a colonial country. We think of all these Scandinavian countries which have never colonized anyone. But if you think of their contribution to mission in Africa and all over the world, it's just unfair.

When we are talking about the colonial history, how many countries are we actually talking about? We are talking about a handful of countries like France, Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Germany. That's it. But the missionaries came from many other countries with absolutely zero colonial connections. They just went because they felt the need to share the gospel like it was shared to Europe before. So you can't say all mission is just linked to colonialism. Also, to blame the whole of Europe and the European Union for this, although it was only seven countries that actually actively colonized, is not logical to me. So that's why I think to mention the combination in the same breath is not fair.

What can we as an international mission learn from colonial history?

We must learn that there are many things we don't recognize during our lifetime, because also we are part of our time and we live in the time with its context and history and realities which may later be criticized for even though we didn't actually have had any negative intention. So there are things which we think are good to do today, maybe for the people, but we don't see everything. And I will not be surprised that some years after we are finished, people will never understand how we were thinking. This can even happen during our own lifetime. And later you realize, how did they come to us? You didn't really have any bad intention, but that is the reality of our time and later it's going to be totally criticized.

The second thing is that values and attitudes keep changing, and the connection or the meeting of people influence all. I believe that not everything, which people have to change is bad. I see some of these criticisms we make against missions, even against colonialists, which were cultures of people but were changed and now they are criticized. I'm not totally sure that those changes were only negative.

Let me give you an example. There are places where they practice cannibalism. It was only the intervention of external people in terms of missionaries or even colonial powers which put an end to the practice. It was the culture of the people. Yes, but that culture was evil because it did not respect the image of God and the dignity of every person. Now the culture doesn't necessarily justify the act if it's not good. We have to have values which are Christians, which are based on our understanding of God. And sometimes it's good to actually put some things to the stop because they're just not right. I'm thinking of all the issues dealing with gender based violence that cannot be called "this is our culture", and then it's justified.

Let's be attentive, let's be careful, but let us not shy away from addressing things which we believe sincerely are not correct just because we are afraid of being named. So, that is what I would say as missions we must learn that let us not shy away from criticizing things which are not right just because then we are outsiders or let us not be afraid of thinking what we believe is right just because we might be criticized.

Does the colonial past burden the relationship between the churches in Africa and in Germany even today?

I would say yes. Because the condition of colonialism is not over, not only in the church. The history of colonialism is still with us, especially the impacts. I'm totally "impressed" by the super colonizers who I think are the French. They did their colonialism "very well" by totally brainwashing people and dominating them in all spheres of life, whether it's politics, commerce, finances, international relations, anything. France still rules its former colonies. I'm saying this very loudly these days, and I'm raising questions. I'm challenging our partners in Europe to raise this at the EU and to question the role of France in Africa, where we have all these specific problems only in francophone countries. And when you go there, you see how much they see France as heaven, and how civilization means being French, dressing like a French, eating like a French and drinking the French wine and Evian water from France and everything like that.

It's not only the community, but also for the church. So I would say that the past is there because we are the same people. If you go to a certain place where the relationship between the former colony and the countries is high, like the British and Kenya, you can see the connections which are still there, not only in the churches but also in churches as part of the wider society because the church is part of the society. The mentality is the same and the thinking is just there. So they're not colonialists, but the same kind of imperialism by American influencers in the churches, particularly in the modern churches in Africa. The relationship between American and African churches is so high. But at the same time, there are still the relationships with the mission organizations like UEM with its German past. Why are the relationships with the former German colonies stronger? These relationships are still there, not only with the churches, but the past is more present in the churches than in the rest of society. And why? I don't know. I think because as I said earlier, the relationship between churches was different from the relationship with the colonial state. Therefore, when the state relationship ended, the relationship with the churches stayed and has never been broken until today, and people like it.

But the mentality, the thinking is still there. But I think there is also another side, which I think is not good. I mentioned this just now, namely because of the identification with colonialism and mission. There is a high sensitivity, especially on the part of the churches in the North, because they don't want to be identified with colonialism. Therefore, they are very reserved and cautious with their partners in the global South, and they let them get away with things that they normally would not accept among themselves, because they are afraid of being called imperialists or colonialists. This is not honest communication, but communication of fear. And this is a consequence of the colonial history that strains the relationship between the churches in the North and their partners in the global South.

Could we as an international mission better support our brothers and sisters in faith in Africa with regard to their current challenges?

I would say yes. I have observed two ways. The first one is direct support. These sisters and brothers in Africa, they have many challenges because of the realities of the world. And we know that. Now it is not right to say because the problem that's so big, it's not the business of the Church. These churches get engaged where they are within a small congregation or a Church district or even as national Church. And even now, a continental organization like us, we are dealing with issues, with problems, some of diaconical nature, some of development nature. Some of these really need to be strongly advocated that we should not stop the direct support because the problems are so many. But as an African proverb goes, how do you eat a cow? The answer is: not at one piece at a time. Because the cow is so big, you can't swallow it. Actually you can eat all of it, but only one piece at a time until you finish it. So we use this in terms of big problems. You can't solve the whole thing all by yourself or at once. But every piece which you try to solve or do contributes to reaching the goal of getting the whole cow eaten up.

So the churches and missions should not feel “oh our contribution is so small!” but it contributes to the bigger goal of finishing the whole cow. So even small projects like a water pump for a village or just a kindergarten somewhere are important.

That is my view. You can't wait until the whole globe comes together for advocacy. The advocacy work of the churches and the missions is very important. They can advocate within their own countries. They can advocate even in their continent. We are thinking, for example to advocate towards the European Union, to make sure that the issues and the concerns of Africa are raised. The voice of the churches and missions in Europe is still strong.

So those are the two ways: direct support, but also advocacy which is not quite direct.

Can German theologians also learn from their African brothers and sisters in faith in dealing with mission?

I say definitely yes. But in order to do so, they must accept that they can gain something which is not an automatism. Second, when it comes to mission they must realize that mission work in Africa was faster after the missionaries left. So mission was not a monopoly of missionaries or foreign theologians.

The third is that at least one of the other things they can learn is that they do not accept this analysis of sociology. *“Our church is going to collapse anyway. It's going to be smaller anyway. That's how it is.”* Regarding the mathematical things there is really no question of God in there. We can't do mission by mathematical analysis and calculation. In order to do mission we have to rely on supernatural intervention to which many European theologians have a very distance. They don't really talk about it as such. I'm surprised myself when I was in Ghana, where the Presbyterian Church had a synod and they decide within the next three years, I think, they want to increase the number of their congregations by 30 per cent. Now there is really no mathematical calculation as justification. “We are going to build this new Church today. We have a Church building for only 50 people but we are going to build a Church building for 500.” And they actually started. That is the component which I think the mission thinkers in Europe don't have; that there are things which we don't know. We just have to go by faith hoping that something will happen by the intervention of God which we don't know. For them, that is a problem. They are too rational, they have to calculate and project until the year 2030 or 2050. In their projections there is really no room for the supernatural intervention. It's not there but that's the driving force of mission work in Africa. They do things where they don't know what will happen but they believe in hope and just move on. How does it happen whether it works or not? I don't know. Sometimes of course they fail. They don't succeed all the time. So many of them fail but they are ready to try and start and pray and wait for the unknown. I think this element is the one which they might learn from us. Whether they are bold enough to actually try it, is a good question.

So basically the centrality of God in mission, the action of God in mission, the Holy Spirit, I think this the major aspect. They could learn, if they want.

I have also to say that the things which the people in Europe should not learn from African mission thinking, because it is absolutely irrational, is when it comes to misleading theology. But here we need help if we can also accept to learn, because it's also the same question whether Africans can listen anymore to Europeans in terms of theology. I'm not so sure, but I think we need to know because of my experience in both cultures. One of the things I continue to say is the biggest spiritual gift which God gave to all people: our brain. Let's not be afraid of using our brain, because all of this misleading theology here exist like there is no brain, like there is no rationality. Just go by faith, whatever you think. And what I'm telling people is: “Hey, use your brain which God has given to us!” Don't do these very stupid things, which I see is happening all over the place. So that is where I see also the need for mutual assistance.

How can we as mission and church contribute to breaking stereotypical views about people and societies in the Global South and vice versa in the Global North?

I think we need to focus more on partnerships and interpersonal encounters. Unfortunately, COVID 19 doesn't help. But we need to meet people and shake their hands and eat with them, hug people. Otherwise those stereotypes won't go away. I don't have the stereotypes as I used to have after I lived in Germany, because then you realize these are just people like you. And I remember one of the very frustrating answers I gave in one interview in Germany was when they were asking me what has shocked me. And I said, what has shocked me is to see how similar all human beings are, because the problems I used to have as General Secretary of the North-Western Diocese are basically the same as General Secretary of UEM. You have a bit of this more here and a bit of more of this there. But in principle, human beings are just human beings. And that's it. Without this real interaction and working together, we always have stereotypes.

And the second thing is we must be transparent about our stereotypes and bring them for discussion. That's the only way. When we have this direct contact, it is always good if we can put those stereotypes on the table and see how to deal with them. But sometimes they are maybe not stereotypes but cultural differences, which we don't need to change, just accept people like they are. I have been reading some books. How was this book called about Germans? I think it's an American author of "Germany for dummies" or something like that. Where they are trying to explain how the Germans behave. I laughed and laughed and laughed a lot because actually most of it is true. Like how people are annoyed by a little mistake because things must be perfect, which is true. But is that a stereotype or it's just a cultural knowledge of how people work? I remember myself when there was this German man - I think he was the head of one Department in Germany during my time, an older pastor. For lunch we had to register and to order food. And we counted how many guests are there. And we went to eat at this sisterhood's place, and there was one person more, without registration and they had to bring in another plate and that was like a disaster for this man I could never understand. So he was asking who didn't register? It's not that there was not enough food. The food was there. But the man was so angry that someone came without registration.

Now this is when you are talking about "Ordnung" (order). For me this is not a stereotype but it is something which you understand how people are used to think and are used to act and which you have to understand in your relationship. So some of these are not really bad stereotypes which you must change or overcome. But some of these are just cultural differences which I have had to change myself when I came here. Not before, even before I went to Germany. But especially when I came back from America and went to a church service in Tanzania which took three hours and I was totally tired and I wanted things to end because of time. I have checked my watch and then it took me time to realize, well, I'm the only one with the problem here, everybody else not. So why would I want to change these people?

Some of these are stereotypes which you must address and try to change with them but some of them are no stereotypes but cultural differences. So those are the things which I want to say that let's discuss, increase transparency, but also understand some of these differences are just there.

In many church partnerships, the classic giver-receiver automatisms are still at work. This is often associated with paternalistic behavior on the part of the givers. What possibilities do you see for overcoming the North-South power gap linked to money, including the discriminatory side effects?

I think the question is very true that there is this giver and receiver relationship and it's true that it has paternalistic tendency. My answer is that as long as there is asymmetry in global economics, we are not going to overcome this very easily. That would take time.

And also it is not different. I think it's human. And the one who gives has a certain feeling of superiority over the one who is receiving. It's not between countries only, it's even within families, because it is so that poorer members of the family or the clan, they don't receive the same level of respect and recognition that the ones who have more, especially we know that a lot here. I think that's just human. And as long as there is this asymmetry, there is one of the reasons to say "don't give because it's going to feel paternalistic!" or "I don't give because they must solve it themselves." That's not a solution. That doesn't help because it violates the commandment of love that you can't see your brother or sister being naked who you can actually dress. We all must continuously face the challenge of being humble when we have more than others. I can see it between European countries the way the Northern Europeans think of Portuguese and Spanish people and maybe Southern Italians, it's not the same as they think of the richer countries in the North of Europe.

It's purely economic. I could even feel it when I was in Berlin with a pastor friend of mine who was with us in Makumira during those days when we were studying and he was explaining to me how they feel about the Western part of Germany as Eastern Germans. These are the same people at a certain time and the result is economic, nothing else. That when he told me the difference between "Vereinigte" (uniting) und "Vereinte" (united) and he told me that our mission is still "Vereinigte" (uniting) and not "Vereinte" (united). They feel that inferiority because of the economic status, nothing else. So that would be my thinking about this? I say, well, is this really about colonialism? Is this really about racism? I don't think so. It's purely economics. As long as you have poorer people in Africa and the much more affluent North, this will always be there.

To completely overcome the feeling of superiority is not easy. Let's be honest about it. For example here in Nairobi they all have their financial stability. Especially at funerals in the villages, which are a big thing here, you can see that the village people and others separate from the people from Nairobi eating in this house and the people from the village will eat in that house, they are the same clan but they have different financial stability, you can find the difference of quality of food and of things like that, even at the same village and within the same family. So that's why I think it's mainly about economics.