

United Evangelical Mission (UEM): Challenges and Opportunities for Internationalization and Equal Partnerships

Introduction

The UEM was formerly known as the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* (RMG), amongst others, a German mission organization that was instrumental in the establishment founding of several large churches in Asia and Africa. The motivation was to make the Word of God accessible to the “heathens” or non-Christians in other countries in Asia, Africa, and America: internationality, in some sense, was important to the RMG. Mission work, or spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth, was perceived as being in line with the message of Jesus in Mark 16:15.

The internationalization of mission created a dichotomy for the “old churches”, who perceived themselves to be messengers of God or “midwives” of the new, emerging churches in Asia and Africa. This split understanding is still present in the thinking of European churches and churches in Asia and Africa today – consciously and unconsciously. Even after the countries in Asia and Africa became sovereign nations, the ecumenical community maintained the concept of “older” and “younger” siblings. Throughout the course of history, the churches in Germany have considered the churches in the global South as their younger siblings in need of guidance and supervision. On the other hand, even though the economic and political situation has improved for many countries in the global South, many churches in Asia and Africa still consider the churches in Europe to be their older siblings and still count on them for help. We must focus on mutuality and participation as central aspects of partnership relations.

The United Evangelical Mission: A vision of equality

Dr Soritua Nababan, the first moderator of the international UEM, has often criticized this understanding of mission. He has suggested that the UEM should, among other things, change its name, as it is no longer simply a successor to the RMG, but a new kind of communion of churches in three continents. According to Nababan, the name was retained to appease the donors and friends of mission in Germany, many of whom wanted to preserve the old understanding of mission. In the course of time, the enthusiasm of the donors towards the ideology of mission changed; the modern interpretation of “mission” was no longer appealing. More and more voices called for abandoning the ideology of mission and even changing the name of the UEM to ensure that future donors would remain interested in its work. Dr Nababan’s

criticism has become even more relevant in Germany's churches today, but a change in identity is not so easy for those non-European churches that are a product of German mission in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. German missionaries were and still are highly admired, even idolized, in African and Asian churches, whereas in German churches many missionaries have been forgotten.

The UEM was able to reorganize its structure in 1996 and 2008 into an international communion of churches, a process that was not easy, especially considering the challenges from the member churches in Germany, Asia, and Africa.¹ Since its internationalization, the UEM has developed five pillars or working fields that describe the focus of its work: Evangelization, Development, Advocacy, Diaconia, and Partnership. The staff exchanges between the three regions have intensified. UEM churches in Asia and Africa are becoming more and more independent, financially and structurally. The financial responsibility does not lie on the shoulders of the German churches alone; the churches in Asia and Africa have significantly increased their contributions to the communion. For instance, the churches in the global South have hosted guests and events – contributions that have been highly appreciated but unfortunately have yet to be officially acknowledged. The activities of “United Action” and increased membership fees in Asia and Africa have raised a meaningful amount of funds for the UEM. In 2018, the UEM General Assembly was held in Parapat, Indonesia, and all the local costs were covered by the host churches. This continued when the Asia Regional Assembly in Nias and the Asia Regional Board meeting on in Kalimantan were covered by the respective host churches. In Africa, the Kimara congregation in Dar es Salaam has been able to finance more than one full scholarship for students from Germany. German churches are even applying for funds from the UEM and have received them.

Despite the difficult times due to natural catastrophes, pandemics, and political unrest, the churches in Asia and Africa have been able to become more and more self-reliant. It must be noted that global economic injustice has created a notable difference between the churches in Germany and those in Asia and Africa. The churches in Germany are generally wealthier because of the church taxes and stable economic and political system in the country, but more and more people in Germany are leaving the church. The churches in Asia and Africa face economic and political insecurity. One result is a feeling of dependency on their “older” siblings in Germany, with the German churches still seeing their “younger” siblings as victims who need pity.

¹ Cf. Peter Sandner, *Der Weg zur Internationalisierung der UEM*, (Wuppertal: United Evangelical Mission), 2007.

Many conflicts arise from this “giver–receiver” mentality. Partners in Germany act as managers and demand to be given access to the decision-making process in their partner churches in the global South. Partnerships are terminated if these demands are not fulfilled, with the German partners citing alleged issues of corruption and a failure to communicate. UEM members in all regions are united as a body of Christ and reject any human arrogance, which only fuels tensions and conflicts further. A true Christian partnership would not fail to move beyond mistaken colonialist feelings of economic superiority on the one hand and dependency syndrome on the other. Internal conflicts in the Asian and African churches are often exacerbated by intervention from the German partners, under the pretext of mediation. In many instances, as described by UEM General Secretary Rev. Volker Martin Dally, the UEM is excluded from bilateral relationships between partner churches because it no longer adheres to the paternalistic system.

As stipulated in the UEM Code of Conduct for “Transparency” and “Against Corruption”, all partners are to avoid the trap of abusing public or private authority, which can damage partnership relations.

We acknowledge that the process of internationalization must be continued if it is to be successful. The churches in Germany, Asia, and Africa must be encouraged to change their mindset. The churches in the global South are already able to acquire large amounts of funding for their own activities, but they feel poor and inferior when communicating with partners in Germany. If all members of the UEM can really see themselves as equal parts of a communion, this change in mentality will become a reality. The Tanzanian Bishop Josiah Kibira put it this way back in 1991: “Now we are partners. That means: we are all simultaneously receiving and giving. There is no church that has nothing to give, small as it is. There is no church that needs nothing, as rich and large as it is. We need each other.” We are already seeing good progress in this direction.

As we all struggle with the Covid-19 pandemic, the financial support from partners in the global North is highly appreciated. We should remain aware, however, that this kind of support might encourage ideas of inferiority or superiority. The structural changes in the UEM are here to stay: The churches in Asia and Africa are no longer being perceived as receivers, for instance of full scholarships, but as partners that are expected to share the financial burden of the work of the UEM. The churches in Germany seem to have not fully understood that the money they give should not be seen purely as an act of charity, but as serving the common goal of the churches in the global South becoming more self-reliant. In fact, the goal should be that the churches in the global South are able to give back to the partners in Europe. Our aims of internationalization,

partnership, and community cannot be realized if the churches in Germany still see themselves only as givers and cannot imagine taking a receiving role, let alone actively seeking support from their partners in the South. Likewise, if churches in the global South still see themselves only as recipients, then internationalization and true partnerships will remain far out of reach.

We see a paternalistic pattern continuing between ecumenical partners in the North and South. This tendency was also noted by Bachrach and Baratz, who argued that power over others can also be exercised in more subtle ways within a social or political system in a manner that prevents some people or groups from advancing their own self-identified interests.² If the churches in Europe continue to exercise power over their partners in the South through financial assistance, perhaps they are not interested in the desire of those partners to become truly equal.

Quo Vadis? Partnership and power relations in the UEM

The definition of *partnership* itself contains several connotations related to its colonial, feudalistic, and hierarchic background. In its early history, partnership took the form of agreements among business partners in order to strengthen their cooperation for the goal of a financially profitable business. According to its original character, a partnership could be terminated at any time for abuse of agreements, or if one party had been proved to violate the trust between both parties. In Europe, partnerships were first implemented during the commercial revolution in the thirteenth century,³ when European countries sought to occupy land in Asia, Africa, and South America to seize trade in commodities that were rare in Europe such as spices, gold, and silk. The partnerships among European traders and nations created new sources of wealth through colonialism. As some churches continue to use the term “partnership”, we are concerned that its colonial definition is being kept alive in the ecumenical imagination, perpetuating the North-South dichotomy.

Europeans are perceived as diligent, hard-working, and wealthy, whereas people from the global South are seen as lazy, poor, and corrupt. Germans may be seen as rational and Africans as emotional. These prejudices still exist, even in the minds of many people in Asia and Africa: several Asian and African students have expressed to us that they feel they must adhere to Eurocentric standards of knowledge. In joint activities within the UEM, a number of German

² Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1970, p. 7.

³ “Vasco da Gama”, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition, (Columbia: Columbia University Press), 2001.

members are often still the most vocal, dominant voice in the conversation – not just because of the language barrier, but because many participants from Asia and Africa still believe the words of the Europeans are better and always right. The authors of this paper have lived in Germany for years, and we do not see that there is any truth to these stereotypes. Meetings in Germany can begin late, people here can be undisciplined and irresponsible (especially during a pandemic), and some Germans will talk confidently of things they know little to nothing about. On one occasion, we were surprised to see an institution in a German member church reject a South-North volunteer from Asia in favour of someone from Africa, “who could play the drums to entertain people” in their church. Several pastors from the global South who have come to Germany on the UEM exchange programme have been met with scepticism because their German is not fluent enough (even though they might be multilingual themselves, and the people they serve in the congregation only monolingual), even as German pastors serving in the South expect to be met with lenience and special treatment.

As integral parts of the UEM, partnerships and any other new forms of relationship call upon all UEM members to remain one body of Christ, growing together and accepting one another in their differences without prejudice. It is our hope that partnership will improve and continue from one generation to the next, like a relay race. Partnership responsibility should be spread over more shoulders. People live in one world and in one Church of Jesus Christ. Taking part in making this known and keeping it alive should be a priority in all partnership activities.

Concluding remarks

After these first twenty-five years of an international UEM, we offer a few critical and hopefully constructive remarks for the journey ahead:

- a) One alternative term we may offer to define an inclusive and equal relationship in the context of the UEM is “companionship”. Taking inspiration from Jesus’s ministries with his disciples, the relationship among the Christian communities could be depicted as companionship on the pilgrimage, bearing the burdens of others, learning and journeying together in joy and sorrow. Companionship is an effort to accompany one another through life in God’s household (ecumenism). The framework of deeper and trustworthy companionship is the radical discipleship of Christ, who accompanies the whole of creation in the values of equality, inclusivity, empowerment, and sustainability until the end of the world. In companionship, we have the

chance to learn from each other and grow together, as the UEM has discerned in its framework, “Global Learning in Ecumenical Perspective” (GLEP).

- b) The focus of the UEM in both its structure and its areas of work must always challenge the bilateralism, one-sided communication, and paternalistic mentality that are so damaging for our community. Exchanges and encounters among people from all three UEM regions must be intensified: not just North-South, but also South-South. The volunteer programme should be expanded because the presence of young people from a different context is an enrichment opportunity for the churches and an important experience in cultural education for the participants. The International Study Programmes and Summer Schools that help people learn together are important because their participants can serve as multipliers when they return to their home churches and apply what they have learned. It is also important to place decision-makers and staff from different countries and cultures into many structural positions in the three regions of the UEM. The GLEP concept – no longer do we learn only from one another, but all together – must be popularized at a grassroots level in the three regions. The UEM communion cannot be a meaningful communion unless it is based on a participative, inclusive, and equal approach.
- c) Prejudices and stereotypes destroy the humanity of people, and they do so in two directions. They destroy the humanity not only of those who are targeted by prejudice, but also of those who spread or hold on to such beliefs. Those who cling to attitudes of being a giver, a helper, forfeit their own chances of learning and thus hinder their own development. To rebel against such traditional definitions is not a loss, but a gain. This transformation of mentalities should apply not only to the partnership relations among the UEM member churches, but also to the global Christian and development institutions that conduct partnership tasks extensively.
- d) Most urgent is the demand for any ecumenical body to encourage and help all churches to influence their countries to strive for justice and to work for equality. Concretely, this means that those who gather much should not have too much and those who gather little should not have too little. If economically strong churches share their wealth with others, this generosity should be assessed from a theological point of view and should not be seen as a tool to dominate the receiver. This principle must be rooted in justice, balance, equality, and self-reliance.

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