

Mission and Power. Some personal experiences.

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Abstract:

- The Presbyterian Church of Rwanda proclaimed a moratorium in 1971 (!), that is some years before the AACC decided to proclaim it during its General Assembly in Lusaka 1974.
- One year after this I was invited to become missionary of that church. We were prepared to be cautious.
- Nevertheless during the first General Synod of the Church that I attended my first prudent intervention was the reason for a real clash.
- This was the (new) starting point for a long time of collaboration between our Churches, and between me and colleagues of the Presbyterian Church and other churches, on the basis of a sincere collegiality, that lasts until today.
- The position of weakness of the missionary, may also work out sometimes has his strength, and his independence from the Church hierarchy as his freedom.
- But the question of power will loom always on the background. The financial crisis in the West, may be fruitful for the renewal of the relationships between the Churches of the North and the South.

I was a young parish pastor in the early seventies, in a village, Numansdorp, a twenty kilometers in the south of Rotterdam.

I was interested by a short message in the journal about the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, where our Church, the Protestant Church of The Netherlands, had sent quite a few missionary workers:

all of a sudden, the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda had suspended all relations with its partners in Europe. The Church did not accept any longer money or missionaries from their three European partners, Churches in Switzerland, in Belgium and The Netherlands.

Missionary workers present in the country were not allowed to work out new initiatives, their position within the Church was unclear.

Should this had happened in 1974, it should have been called: a Moratorium. It was by then that the AACC The All African Council of Churches had proclaimed the Moratorium, in which the member churches were invited to review all relations with European partner churches, in order to get rid of the guardianship and the supervision of the so called Mother Churches. No missionary and no money, for a period of time.

In 1971 the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda proclaimed its own moratorium, even before the term was invented.

When I read the message of this decision, I cut out the message, as I appreciated this attitude of African self-consciousness.

I learned that there was a great confusion in the Mission Center of our church.

Finally the leadership of our Mission received a message that the Presbyterian Church was willing to explain their position if they accepted to come to the capital of Rwanda.

Their they learned was at stake: three European missionary agencies had a relationship with the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda. In those days the intercontinental connections were still

expensive and complicated. Therefore the missionary initiatives from the three partners in Europe were coordinated in Brussels, under the leadership of a dynamic secretary who knew the church in Rwanda very well, and who was convinced that he knew also what was good for the church.

There was concentration of Missionary power in Brussels, which was interpreted by the Presbyterian Church as a burden, a guardianship, that was a hindrance for its self expression and development. In fact it was in Brussels that the European partners met. In reality, it was decided politely where a new Church building should be planned; what kind of salaries should be paid by the church in Rwanda; what should be the arrangements for the housing and the travelling expenses of the pastors.

After this unexpected and hard moratorium new rules of partnership were developed: the Presbyterian Church offered each of the European partners the text of a convention on the basis of a bilateral relationship.

In the contract of partnership the position of the missionary personal was clearly described. They were considered as fraternal workers in the service of the Presbyterian Church, who were paid by the mission, but were accountable to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church. Each partner Church had to declare solemnly that it should have in no way a relationship or a consultation with the other European partners. Only the Presbyterian Church should be allowed to organize such a consultation.

One of the consequences was also that individual missionaries should not do any fundraising for their own projects in their 'home church'. Money is power. The power of decision making and the budget should be in hands of the local church: the Presbyterian Church. The power of money offered by an individual missionary, may hinder the independence of the local church.

2. One year later, I got a telephone call from the Missionary Center of our Church, who asked me if I was interested to become a missionary in that Presbyterian Church in Rwanda. They needed a theological advisor the Theological Training Center of the Church. The Center was directed by a Rwandese pastor, and provided courses at all levels of the church: pastors, church elders, primary school teachers, Sunday school teachers ; edited a monthly bulletin of the Church, and so on.

I was glad to have the opportunity to serve such a progressive and independent Church. In those days it became already questionable if the primary missionary task of the European Churches was still to go abroad in order to raise churches overseas.

I had some understanding for that position. Therefore I considered myself not so much as a missionary from the Dutch protestant church as well as a pastor in the service of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda.

I was prepared to be reluctant to take initiatives, and try to be open minded enough to listen carefully to the priorities and wishes formulated by the church, particularly to my direct colleague, the Rwandese pastor who was my Director, and who was also responsible for the local parish where we lived.

3. It happened that it was there was a meeting of the General Synod about half a year after I started working in the Training Centre. My Rwandese colleague and I had worked out series of courses and meetings all over the church, and we were proud to present these plans to the assembly of the Synod.

Shortly before the meeting of the Synod, I had discussed with the General Secretary of the Church, pastor Naasson HITIMANA, about our proposals. During that discussion I suggested

that because of our important programme, my colleague should become into fulltime service of the Training Centre, and that somebody else should take over his responsibilities for the parish. I knew that this was the wish of my colleague. The General Secretary said to me that he totally agreed with us, and he promised his collaboration.

The General Synod took notice of the programme that was developed by my colleague and me, and was ready to accept it. At that very moment, I asked the floor in consultation with my colleague, and very politely suggested that this programme should have a better chance of success if my colleague should be dispensed from his duties for the parish, in order to concentrate fully on the activities of the Training Centre.

This was the reason for a great clash. I remember that one of the delegates started telling that the dominance of the missionaries should finally end. He declared that it was not my task to tell the Church who should be pastor of what parish. He proposed to send me back to Holland. It was clear that the majority of the members of the Synod showed their approval to this intervention, and agreed with this eloquent speaker. I tried to explain my view once more. But this worked out even more opposition. No single person gave support to my colleague and I. No word from the General Secretary. In this mood the session was interrupted.

Nobody spoke to me after that session. Except for one: the General Secretary. He came to see me, and said only one sentence: 'There is no misunderstanding between you and me.'

I was completely puzzled.

For me it was the first important lesson in the dynamics of power between European and African churches, and the sensitivities on these questions. Also on the dynamics of power within the African church I tried to serve. I had intervened in the relationship between my colleague and the General secretary, his position towards his African colleagues within the Church, etc.

3. I cannot tell you the whole story. I only may add that for me it was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration within the church, during nine years. After the genocide in 1994, the Church asked us to come once more for a period of several years.

In these periods the leadership of the church often consulted me about the question who should be appointed as my direct colleague, what kind of programme should be worked out. In May of this year, I was invited - as the only European theologian - to give a presentation during a colloquium organized by Theological Institutes in East Africa on the question how to work out an Africanization of Theological Education.

4. Why did I tell this story, in relation to the theme *Power and Mission*?

It is to show some important realities:

Relating to the relationships between the churches:

- A) Just after the independence of the local churches in the non-western world, the Mission agencies have continued for a long time a patronizing attitude towards the new Churches. The money gave them often a lot of power.
- B) Partner churches in the non-Western world have been often in pains to gain their independence, and to develop with the European partners a way of Power Sharing.
- C) Power sharing has proven to be a very difficult process, that has sometimes negatively influenced the relationship between partner churches.

Relating to the position an the power and weakness of the foreign missionary:

D) In this process the mode of communication of the partner churches is some time difficult to understand.

I remember that once my director, who by then was a person with much influence , within and outside the Church. I had made proposals to organize meetings and conferences for secondary school students during the holidays. He always that ‘yes’ to my ideas. However, he never mentioned this project spontaneously when we met. At the moment that we should make the final decisions for the announcements in the church and the invitation to the students, he apologized for not being able to have this discussion. This was his way of telling me that my proposals were not acceptable.

Only later I found out that organizing meetings for secondary school students was too much politically sensitive for the church, and for my colleague personally. He could not communicate this to me in a direct manner. As speaking about politics towards a European is always felt to be too risky.

E) One of the advantages of sending missionaries is that the European missionaries may transmit their experiences about the sensibilities within the partner churches. He may explain the way they develop their own strategies, and their attitude towards the rich churches in the West.

F) The role of the missionary is more than that. He has a particular position in the Church, as he is not part of the hierarchy like his colleagues. He has no power in that hierarchy. This particular position gives him also a particular power , freedom and independence.

In my case I have felt this, when I wrote a small booklet on the Churches and the genocide. Some people commented my political positions, and said that what I have written is true, but that nobody in Rwanda is able to say this without the risk of being accused and imprisoned.

Finally:

G) The financial crisis in the West has greatly diminished the possibilities for giving financial support to partner churches. This may purify the relationship between the churches.

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