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Ecumenical learning and curricula for Christian education in East Africa

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Zusammenfassung: Vor dem Hintergrund eigener Erfahrungen mit missionsgeprägter religiöser Sozialisation beschreibt der Verfasser den Versuch, ein ökumenisch ausgerichtetes Curriculum in Ostafrika zu entwickeln. Auch wenn der Versuch letztlich scheiterte, wirkten die dabei gemachten ökumenischen Erfahrungen lange nach.

Anza A. Lema

Ecumenical Learning and Curricula for Christian Education in East Africa

Introduction

- Ecumenical learning like any other learning does not take place in a vacuum, but in some context. Thus for me, my context for ecumenical learning was in Tanzania in East Africa. East Africa in this connection means the region in the eastern part of Africa which comprises of the following countries: Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. Christian mission in this part of Africa dates back to the middle of the 19th century. It is, therefore, rather new.

- Again ecumenical learning may take place in a class-room or school; at local community level through interrelationships of people of different Christian denominations or different religions; at national level through various means and ways.

- My first experience, more or less, took place at the third category, namely national. I did not have much opportunity for ecumenical learning at my primary school or at local community level in my village. We were all Lutherans at my primary school and in the village.

- Not only that but we were all Lutherans of the Leipzig school and Leipzig theological tradition if there was one like that. Leipzig for us was the centre of Christianity. I became a 'Leipzig Lutheran' not out of my own rational choice or that of my parents, but as a result of political decision.

- In 1896 a German District Commissioner for Kilimanjaro had a meeting with Lutheran and Catholic missionaries in the area and partitioned the whole district into Lutheran and Catholic areas in order to avoid competitions and conflicts among them. Thus I grew up in the area given to the Leipzig missionaries. Anyone who opted for the new religion of white missionaries became a Lutheran. In my youth up to the age of 16 years, I never met a Christian of another denomination but Lutherans of Leipzig mission. It was not until I went to a boarding school far from the village that I met Lutherans from other mission societies than Leipzig. I still had a long way to go to begin my ecumenical learning. I should say here, however, that the missionaries had talked about Catholic and Martin Luther. Since Catholics were not close by it did not matter. They were different from us. It was doubtful to me that they were Christians.

From the end of the World War I to the time of political independence for each country, the ruling colonial power in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda was Britain. This meant that there were a lot of similarities in terms of systems of administration, judiciary and legislature. The education system was the same for all the three countries; the curriculum for all subjects and the examinations system at the end of secondary education were the same.

The churches were responsible for programmes of religious

education leading to baptism, confirmation, Sunday school and other domains concerned with Christian life and nurture. Each denomination was responsible for its own Christian education programmes. Many of them were unable to prepare their own programmes locally and instead borrowed some from what was called 'mother churches' whose missionaries had been instrumental for the establishment of mission churches in the countries. In the case of the Lutheran church for example, Luther's Small Catechism constituted the Christian education programme. It was used at all levels of learning. We learnt it until we could literally recite it from memory. In a way it was the Bible for the children.

The curriculum for Christian education at primary school level was also left to the individual churches to design and implement. As Christian Councils in the three countries started to take organisational shape, the need was felt for the member churches to work together on a common curriculum for religious knowledge at primary school level. Before much could be accomplished in that area, political development was gaining great momentum in all the countries. It was beginning to look as if the whole region was going to gain political independence almost at the same time. And because of proximity and similarity in almost all spheres of influence, many people were hoping that after independence the three countries would federate and form one Republic. This hopeful feeling gave the Christian councils in East Africa some impetus or motivation to start working together. They argued that they should not be seen to lack behind what was seeing as a political will to move towards greater integration of the community. The membership of Christian councils in East Africa was limited to protestant churches. The Catholics did not want to be part of them.

The Development of Christian Councils

Before political independence, churches in all the three countries had been largely what was called - mission churches. In other words, they were not autonomous nor were they in the hands of local leadership. They were not self-

reliant in terms of having enough of their own finances for administration. But from the middle of 1950s, many of the mission churches were slowly transforming themselves into autonomous local churches. Lack of qualified African Christians left the leadership of the churches in the hands of missionaries while the training of local leadership was being intensified. By 1960, African leadership was becoming evident in many churches.

What pushed missionary societies to work together in some fields such as education and health was not a desire for unity of the churches but the need to speak with one voice before the colonial government when that was necessary. They had discovered that united they were strong. But as they met in many of their joint meetings to discuss their strategies with which to face the government they were also learning about each other. Eventually, the growing familiarity among them helped to reduce denominational tensions. In the 1960s, when the local autonomous churches were beginning to dialogue with African governments, they felt the need to transform former mission conferences into Christian councils. The most influential denominations in the Christian Council of Tanzania were Anglican, Lutheran, Moravian, Salvation Army and African Inland Church. Former tensions had greatly being reduced. There was a clearly felt need to work together on certain issues far beyond education and health.

Ecumenical learning in each of the territory was assigned to the Christian councils and their institutions. There was very little direct communication that happened at the grass root level between the denominations. Yet it must be said that apart from the pastors who had been brought up under close influence of and trained by missionaries, there was no clear grasp of denominational theological differences in so far as the majority of African Christians were concerned. It was usual to find members of different denominations within one extended African family. As Donald M'Timkulu, a South African, describes it: "The social ties binding the African Christian to his extended family and clan have always been stronger than forces of separation that arise from membership in different denominations. The important family occasions like births, marriages, funerals and clan festivals bring together in one place of worship relatives with different confessional backgrounds. On these occasions they not only share in common acts of worship with gay disregard of denominational differences, but they also take part in symbolic acts of family and clan unity that have their roots in the traditional past." There has always, therefore, been much more tolerance for denominational

differences at the grass root level in Africa and particularly in urban areas.

Ecumenical Learning Experience

In 1964, the Christian Councils of the three countries set up a committee that was given the responsibility of studying ways and means of developing a common curriculum for religious education in schools in the whole region. It was becoming clear that independent countries had a moral responsibility to develop education systems of their own choice which were contextual and met their own national needs. That being the case, the churches could not expect the governments to develop curricular for Christian education. Hence the need for the appointment of a Christian Inter-territorial Committee for that purpose. There were only a few Africans on that committee. The majority were missionaries. I was one of the few Africans on it. This was to be an important ecumenical learning for me.

At this time there was no Lutheran Church in Uganda, but there was a small conservative Lutheran mission in the western part of Kenya. In Tanzania, however, the Lutheran Church was the second largest and strongest protestant church after

the Anglican church. Fortunately, too, the relationship between the Lutheran and the Anglican churches in Tanzania had been good for a long time. During the time of the two

World Wars, when the German Lutheran missionaries in Tanzania were interned and finally expelled, it was the Anglican missionaries who provided leadership in some of the Lutheran mission stations in the country. In all the three territories, the Anglican Church was strong and powerful during the colonial days specifically because of its relationship with the British monarchy.

The committee was composed of educators and a few pastors. Some of the first questions which were discussed at length concerned the place of denominational theological traditions or basis. After a long discussion, it was agreed that there should be a place in. The curriculum and a time during the teaching of Christian education when each denomination could step in to teach about its different theological tradition. The curriculum development for that portion was to be the responsibility of the denomination concerned which was also expected to identify the person to teach it. This particular portion of the curriculum was not for public examination. The responsible teacher could set a class examination if that was needed. It was further agreed that church history as such should be included in the main curriculum and should be part of public examination.

We discovered that we were far apart when it came to the teaching of the Holy Communion. But that section was assigned to confirmation classes. We did not have to deal

with the ordination of pastors, but we talked a lot about the different traditions. What does it mean to make a cross at the end of a prayer? Would it cause problems for the children from denominations without that tradition? How were teachers trained to use the curriculum? Slowly we were learning from one another.

The committee insisted that it was not merely a convenience of working together as churches that was its objective, but also a deliberate effort of dying to help churches to learn to respect each other and for believers to begin to accept one another as members of the same Body of Christ. The acceptance of a uniform curriculum was to be a demonstration of goodwill and tolerance. Where there is a Lutheran teacher, there would be no necessity for the other denominations to bring their own teachers for teaching Christian education and vice versa. The school children would be learning together in an atmosphere of Christian inclusiveness and openness. In that way there would develop mutual respect for the customs and practices in different churches.

Conclusion

The work on the development of Christian education curriculum was initiated in two subcommittees; one for primary school level and another for secondary school. However, the entire work was interrupted when each country in the region decided to have its own system of national education. It was left to the Christian council in each country to work out its own syllabi for religious education in schools in accordance with educational policies of the country. That was the end of a sweet dream of trying to work ecumenically at a regional level in East Africa. But a lesson had been learnt especially by those who were on the committee including me. What followed that first attempt was an ecumenical dialogue between Anglican and Lutheran churches in Tanzania on theological issues.