

happens there are going to be many activities in our church which are not necessarily connected to the Moravian Church as we know it today. But the church is challenged to include all groups. In 1960s, when the East African Revival swept through our Church, leaders like the late Bishop Teofilo Kisanji helped the church stay inclusive. This is our challenge, not only in Tanzania as mentioned before, but also in

Europe, America, and Asia. We need each other for the extension of God's Kingdom on earth.

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Some Thoughts on the Subject of Missions

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In the following discussion I would like to combine some fruits of my reading with other thoughts which have continued to occupy me in recent years. Perhaps this will make clear how fascinating I find the various aspects of the subject of missions and how important I see these for the vitality of our church and all others. They are tiles of a mosaic and pieces of thought which, in my opinion, are worth further exploration.

Rediscovery of an ambivalent concept

For some years now we have been experiencing renewed attention to the subject of missions in European churches. This certainly is in part a result of the growing secularization of our societies which forces the Church to consider its image. The Ecumenical Council of the Netherlands just released a paper in which churches are called to finally take the fundamental changes in Dutch society seriously and to "throw the net to the other

side". The image refers to John 21:5 where Jesus urges the disciples who have caught nothing all night long to throw their nets to the other side of the boat.

On the other hand one notices that in the churches themselves—except for those regular "specialists" in mission—that basically the term "mission" is gladly avoided. Mission projects must deal with the fact that church mission work in the narrow sense is rarely supported by congregational giving. Instead aid for natural disasters, the fight against poverty, or educational projects have stronger appeal.

Mission is a burdened concept. This is due in part to a continued blanket image of its colonial-based history and partly to a certain perplexity in considering what mission could mean today. It is precisely in circles that consider themselves enlightened-liberal that one shirks at the thought of convincing others "of one's own belief," even if one is readily willing in a secular

context, for example politically or economically, not to withhold one's beliefs. Christian faith, however, is a more intimate matter about which it is difficult to communicate. At best we notice with interest the missionary-evangelistic efforts of the churches in the South.

It's not much different for us in the Unity with our 275-year tradition of missions. Here too congregations have tried to avoid the ambivalent term by substituting "Africa Days," a "Day of the World," or something similar for the traditional mission celebration specifically to more readily reach people outside of the shrinking inner circle—a quasi mission effort. The danger in this is that the term "mission" gradually is left to those who shape it in a one-sided fundamental manner and it thereby becomes ever more foreign to us.

I believe we should work on the subject of mission instead of abandoning it or leaving it to others. This year's anniversary is a good occasion for this.

Dealing with the history of missions

The memory of the beginnings of the Herrnhut missions is quite vivid to many in our church which sometimes makes it more difficult to realize how distant the mothers and fathers of mission are from us. People such as Christian David and Leonard Dober were attached to their time just as we are to ours, and the trench that after more than 200 years of enlightenment has been positioned between them and us is difficult to bridge. Still we claim history as a part of ourselves; it constitutes our identity as a Church.

History is always a concept into which we place a part of ourselves. We hold history as true as we need it to be. Thus the history of mission was often written by missionaries with the goal of building up the home congregation and providing proof of God's work among the heathens. Photos were also used to portray the "desired perception." This is seen in a collection at the exhibition of mission photos, "The Distant Neighbor, Pictures of Mission; Mission of Pictures, Ludwigsburg 1996," and various publications of the former archivist of the Basle Mission, Paul Jenkins.

How clearly the individual perspective forms the perception of history became clear to me in 1987 in the South African Moravian Church when I experienced the celebration of Georg Schmidt's 1737 arrival at the Cape. The unbroken positive view of the mission history there was rather strange to me. The thankfulness for the missionary "without whom we would not know Christ" brought to my rather critical perception that which I had expected to see as a result of mission work in the former mission station, Mamre. For example, the conflict between the villagers and missionaries over property rights dating back to the 1900s was still vivid in the memory of some people; even so, the old inhabitants of Mamre told how the missionaries still punished them as adults.

Years later I experienced a discussion between German visitors and native members of the Moravian Church at Genadendal. The visitors had expressed their disappointment about the style of the worship service, which

in their opinion could just as well have taken place in a German congregation. One did not notice that one was in Africa: the same stiffness of the service, hymns translated from the German. To this, one of the South Africans asked back sharply how the German had the right to believe that this was not *their own* South African tradition. The South African brothers and sisters would not allow that the Germans had again stripped them of their own culture in this way.

Our “western guilt complex”¹ sometimes obstructs our view of how arrogant it is to believe that the active mission moment springs only from the missionaries; the “missionees” adopted that which they needed. They were never solely the objects but also subjects of their own history.² Even today the spread of neo-pentecostal and charismatic movements in Africa is often attributed solely to the influence of well-financed US charismatic groups, which inarguably is formidable. But here as well it is the local cultural conditions as well as the intra-African societal attempts to modernize in light of globalization which set the stage for the acceptance of charismatic spirituality. One of the first signs of this insight lies in Zinzendorf’s conviction that no mission can succeed unless the Holy Spirit has laid the groundwork or prepared for the acceptance of the Gospel. Thus the Holy Spirit makes the “missionees” a subject of their history.

Specifically because the history of missions influences us deeply in our relationships in the worldwide Unity, specifically because it

is a concept that we all interpret differently according to our own context, we need a conversation about our common history. In 2000 the Protestant Mission Board in Southwest Germany (with Mission 21 in Basel) held a workshop, planned and conducted with our South African brothers and sisters, about the history of the South African Moravian Church. Unfortunately it was never continued in South Africa even though the South Africans who had helped us strongly advocated for this. It dealt with much more than just history: it dealt with the deepest dimensions of the perception we have of ourselves and one another. Only by having conversation with one another can we bring these perceptions into our conversations with one another.

A plea for a broad, but concrete, understanding of Mission

Currently it seems that scholarship about mission no longer wants to adhere to the concept formed at the world mission conference in Willingen in 1952: any mission in “*missio Dei*” is a justified Godly mission.³ That God sent His Son into the world is the basis of our missions (John 17, 18: 20, 21). *Missio Dei* has a “kenotic structure” (Phil. 2).⁴ Just as God steps out of Himself, forms a covenant with mankind, binds Himself to them, and changes as a direct result of this bond, so following Christ by sending of missionaries is a “stepping-out-of-oneself.” Mission means finding Christ outside one’s own camp (Heb. 13:13) and standing with Him at the edges of society so that the healing power of Christ can also work

through us, his followers. The devotion of God to mankind remains a secret (*Mysterium*) which we carry forth as a secret.⁵ In this respect it does not remain secret.

Our exegetical, critical perception does not readily allow us to fix the trinitarian rationale of missions through Jesus' taking the form of a man to any single Scripture such as the mission command (Matt. 28). Mission can only mirror the movement of God in the world and His loving devotion to mankind and all creation. The fact that the concept of mission became ever broader after Willigen, that mission became known as the "shaloming of all of life" (J. C. Hoekendijk),⁶ turned things around to criticize the plan that, if everything is mission then nothing is mission any longer. How restricted or broad should we understand mission to be today?

I myself believe that our understanding of mission must be all-encompassing: mission is "church in action," church that steps beyond its borders, which presents itself to strangers in a secular world, to different cultures and different religions. The Moravian missions did not go along with the restriction of mission to the "conversion of heathens," but rather considers conversion a result of the shared, all-encompassing love of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the number of those baptized never was an indicator of the success of a mission. Mission was and is successful where it is possible to share one's life with others—strangers⁷—in the same way that God connects to mankind,

living and suffering with marginalized persons and creation. We do not need to fear that if everything is mission, nothing will be mission any longer. It is exactly this integral, comprehensive concept of mission that is seen in the life of Jesus as told in the Gospels.

What will always separate us is "the name that allows us to believe,"⁸ in which we share our life with others. "Christian identity means to be in that place that Jesus decides for us. If we live in that place we get to some extent to the point where we carry His name and find ourselves in the same relationships in which He stands to God and the world."⁹

An example of authentic living at the "place of Jesus" for me was the story of Missionary Rauch who, exhausted from his journey, lay down to sleep in the tent of the Indian chief, putting himself in the hand of this stranger, and thereby caused interest in whatever could possibly cause this unlimited trust.¹⁰ This step, to give oneself into the hand of another, the living and suffering with another can only occur in concrete and authentic ways. In my work on the international council of the Protestant Mission Board in Southwest Germany (EMS) during the development of a mission statement I saw that if one wishes to conceive the entire concept of mission in the worldwide ecumenical social network more concretely one must very quickly speak up for justice, peace, and the preservation of creation.

The World Mission Conference in Salvador de Bahia in 1996 in its voluntary commitment called particularly on churches in cultures

where religion is a private matter to apply the truth of the Gospels to all aspects of public life and society. “The conciliarist process... is not only socially ethical, but a missionary program.”¹¹ Elsewhere Klaus Schaefer identified reconciliation as a central theme of missions today.¹² Where churches stand with and for one another for peace, where they do not allow themselves to be pulled into warlike conflicts and forces, but resist “in the name of Him who allows us to believe,” there they are close to the mission of Jesus.

Enculturation and cultural differences

When, as described above in the history of missions, one cannot distinguish between the subjects and objects but must speak of subjects who tell their own story, when one sees mission as “stepping over the borders,”¹³ then one is close to speaking of mission as a *communicative process*.

Christians come into conversation with others, with that which is different and foreign, through mission—and that which is foreign begins at one’s own door, that is to say, among us. To be able to enter into such a conversation one must learn above all to listen and understand. In conversations that step over borders there is no one who was “he” or “she.”

In our mission history we did not always succeed in listening, and still today we are not always successful. H. C. Bredekamp describes the meeting between Africo, the first baptized member of the Khoikhoi, and Georg Schmidt, at which Schmidt was apparently so enthusiastic about *his own* understanding of faith that he

could not absorb that which Africo wanted to share with him about *his* faith.¹⁴

For other missionaries it occurred that in listening and understanding they became estranged from their own heritage and the church that sent them. One example from the Unity is Samuel Kleinschmidt in Greenland who conducted mission completely “from a Greenland perspective”¹⁵ and eventually went his own way in Greenland. There are similar examples in many mission groups. These were often missionaries who made a significant effort regarding the language and culture of the group to whom they were originally sent. But according to their authorities they went too far, even were suspected of dissolving the core of their message into a form of syncretism.

To this date there still exists a tension between understanding, enculturation of the Gospel, and the danger of syncretism. The adoption of the foreign, which especially finds its expression in the adoption of the foreign language, can not mean jumping over differences, but merely “the process of a reciprocal integration and partial assimilation that remains detached—a form of familiarization from a distance.”¹⁶

This applies to our missions today as well. It remains important that the Gospel can only be believed and communicated when it is incarnated and enculturated. The “canon in a canon,” the core of the message, remains abstract and empty when one tries to distill it out of a narrated, story context. Enculturation of the Gospel can not merely be the application of the contents of a single seed.

Today it is never merely just local or regional cultures that we encounter. The concept newly introduced into ecumenical discussions—“globalization”—tries to deal with this by seeking to bring two conflicting tendencies into one concept: the need for local self-ascertainment and rootedness and the global context in which local cultures continually find themselves. In Ghana I experienced the change processes which occur as a result of the tension between local and global influences most clearly, e.g., the changes in the traditional leadership structure (chieftaincy) or the rapid changes occurring as a result of worldwide networking in cyberspace. Enculturation must therefore always anticipate the brokenness of local cultures. It becomes correspondingly more difficult to appreciate the foreignness of others and to be able to understand them in their foreignness.

T. Sundermeier repeatedly considered the concept of understanding strangers and the process of translating.¹⁷ It seems important to me that one first defines one’s own identity through the appreciation of the difference of strangers. Since Christian identity is narrative, i.e., always communicated through the culturally expressed stories and telling of the Gospel, one can perhaps most closely compare the placing of the Gospel into a foreign culture with the translation of a poem: the translator can translate a foreign poem only if he does not translate it word for word but rather creates a new, personal poem (or story). A translation is successful when through discontinuity it allows recognition of continuity.¹⁸

What does this mean for our self-concept in the Moravian Church and the worldwide Unity? I believe that we must understand and recognize the foreignness of various cultures within the Unity. The foreignness refers to the differences in our beliefs. It seems to me, for example, hardly possible to come to a common statement on topics such as homosexuality (which is hardly just an ethical topic, but also one which affects the basis of our faith just as the understanding of the Bible does). Even today’s understanding of atonement and sacrifices, something critically discussed in our province, is very diverse within the worldwide Unity.

The unity of the Unity should not prevent us from trying to address our conflicts from our own contexts. Our mission as a “crossing of borders” must deal with both: that which is foreign in our own culture into which we must continuously place the Gospel anew as well as that which is foreign in other cultures within the worldwide Unity. We need one another in the Unity to find the critical distance for our own understanding of the Gospel again. Enculturation can never be understood as a merging into another (local) culture; rather it always also includes the critique of cultures because we as a Church can only understand one another ecumenically—globally connected and networked—and can only take on our own particular cultural surroundings. We cannot solve this tension between mission in one’s own cultural context and the cultural diversity in the worldwide Unity for the benefit of clarity if it masks the important features of our identity.

One example of a mission project in Germany is the “Haltestelle” (Stopping Place) in Cottbus. Through this example we can appreciate how difficult communicating the Gospel and enculturation in a secular environment are. It is easy to criticize the search for suitable communication and enculturation as making the message shallower. We cannot act as if “moving into a secular environment” does not provoke a theological fermentation in our midst. Yet we continue to have difficulty “tossing the net out to the other side” because we still have the opinion that things could continue as they always have. However only wrestling with language skills keeps us vital. We need mission. It is the means to our own transformation.

Mission in the context of religious pluralism

In recent times the topic of mission as it relates to the Christian understanding of other religions has preoccupied me. There are varying opinions about this in our province. In the Netherlands, Surinamese groups of Indian and Javanese descent understand their mission work to be among Hindus and Muslims. At the same time we are supporting an initiative in Switzerland that is planning a “House of Religions” which seeks to promote dialog between different religions. How do mission and dialog relate to one another? For P. Schmidt-Leukel there is no possible reconciliation between mission and dialog because mission “ideally seeks to Christianize the world and thereby overcome all other religions.”¹⁹ Instead he advocates for a pluralistic theology of religions

which overcomes all Christian exclusivity and also avoids inclusive approaches to absorb other religions.

Pluralistic approaches have attracted much criticism in the past. I would like to take these approaches seriously because they are in my opinion much more widely held among Christians than we in the churches believe. This is a case where a “creeping change outside of the official theological discourse”²⁰ has taken place which, if taken on, can enrich the view of our mission especially that in our western cultural areas.

What was stated earlier regarding the understanding of the foreignness of other cultures can refer to other religions as well since they are a part of foreign cultures. The discussion about the relationship between mission and dialog with other religions is of course too broad a topic to be considered here. But we should have this discussion. And I would like to make a few comments about it here.

First, I would like to consider again the previously cited story of Missionary Rauch as told by the Indian Chief Tschoop. Tschoop tells us that the convincing part of Rauch’s proclamation was not the new God which previous missionaries had actually already brought, because his people already knew God. It was not any dogmatic truth and no *proclamation* of truth which worked on Tschoop but rather the personal faith of this man who in following his Lord Jesus Christ put himself in the hands of the Indian and lay down

to sleep in his hut. This story makes two things clear: the meeting of religions always takes place in the meeting of real people who adhere to different religions (and cultures), and only those who are prepared to expose themselves to the other (in the border crossing, kenotic movement of *Mission Dei*, see above) can reach others. After all the real meeting of the minds truly happens not where a claim of truth occurs but where one's own truth is lived.

Second, I would like to refer to a term that I encountered in a preparatory document for the Ninth Convention of the WCC in Porto Alegre in 2006²¹: *hospitality*. Hospitality is used here as a fundamental biblical principle (philoxenia: love of strangers, others). It is the hospitality of our merciful Lord that becomes visible in Jesus' devotion to the excluded. "The Bible sees hospitality primarily as a radical openness to others which is based upon the recognition of the dignity of all people."²²

Jesus does not only supply; he depends on the hospitality of people who take him up. Where He is taken in as a guest, there He can become visible as a host as shown in the story of Emmaus (Luke 24).²³ This hospitality is not noncommittal; it leads to an encounter that changes both sides. The basic question of a claim of truth here is no different than with a pluralistic approach. But it must be said that we must admit in humility that we can not comprehend the secret of salvation. Only through the hospitality of God are we granted a share of His salvation.

The story of Tschoop shows that meeting

persons of other religions occurs not there where we define the conditions of our hospitality, but where we, as followers of Christ and trusting the hospitality of God, accept the hospitality of others. Exactly there is where "God becomes our guest" (Acts 21:3).²⁴

Thirdly I would like to remember the time of Apartheid in South Africa where I experienced how persons of different religions came together in a common cause against the injustice that occurred there and in service for people in need and poverty. Cooperation became more difficult after the end of Apartheid, not just between religions but also among ecumenical churches, because every religious group and church felt they had to return to their own identity. I think we still misunderstand what our mission is in the face of threats to the earth and mankind. It is precisely in the common missionary commitments for peace, justice, and the preservation of creation that opportunities for cooperation exist and where we could see that we are making progress jointly. The consideration of our mission (in a broader sense) makes possible this common path with other religions.²⁵

Part of the special theological profile of the Unity is that in following Christ it combines ecumenical breadth with a lived spirituality. One expression of this ecumenical breadth was Zinzendorf's imprint on tropical teachings in which he found a way to allow the various denominations within the Unity to come into their own.²⁶ We apply it to church and religious pluralism as well. Even today's wide spectrum of

varying beliefs which come and stand together testifies to this. But can the pluralism within a society such as ours to be distinguished from pluralism between religions?²⁷ “The life reference of today’s believer is much more important as a standard in the credibility of a religion” than any belief system.²⁸ Can not the concentration on Praxis Pietatis—life with Jesus where He is, which is clear and credible and yet contains all sorts of metaphysical possibilities—create a means of dealing with other religions in a hospitable and respectful manner?

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- 1 Lamin Sanneh, *Christian Mission and Western Guilt Complexes* (1991), 146.
- 2 The simplified schematization of the terms victims (missionees) and perpetrator (missionaries) is also criticized by Andrea Shultze, “New, Interdisciplinary Approaches to Writing the History of Mission,” in *Manual of Ecumenical Mission Theology*, ed. C. Dahling-Sander (Gütersloh, 2003), 105.
- 3 *Missio Dei Today—To the Actualization of a Key Theological Mission Concept* (Hamburg, 2003).
- 4 T. Sundermeier, *Mission—Gift of Freedom* (Frankfurt, 2005), 99.
- 5 Sundermeier, 33.
- 6 Sundermeier, 44.
- 7 Sundermeier formed the term “konvivenz” for this. Ders, *Understanding the Stranger: a Practical Hermeneutic* (Göttingen 1996).
- 8 According to John Newton’s song: “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds” in the Dutch collection by W. Baranrd. Here the name of Jesus Christ, in whose name mission occurs is emphasized as a distinguishing criterion of Christian mission.
- 9 According to the Anglican bishop Rowan Williams in his speech to the convention of the World Council of Churches in Porto Allegre, February 2006, titled “Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Concept”, found at <http://www.oikoumene.org/>.
- 10 Karl Müller, *200 Years of Moravian Mission, vol. 1, The First Century of Mission* (Herrenhut 1931), 209.
- 11 K. Schäfer, *The Gospel and Our Culture, in Impetus for Mission* (Frankfurt, 2003), 252.
- 12 In a speech to the EMS Mission Council, published in Schäfer, 66-86. Schäfer here borrows from works by Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation* (1996) and Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996).
- 13 Sundkler 1965: Mission for the Church means “constantly crossing its own frontiers”.
- 14 H.C. Bredekamp, *Die verhouding tussen Africo Christian en Georg Schmidt, 1737-1743* (Kapstadt o.J. 5).
- 15 H. Beck, “The peregrinatio hominum in mission Dei,” in *Unitas Fratrum* 9 (1989), 65.
- 16 A. Wierlacher, *Cultural Topic-Foreignness* (Munich, 1993); Sundermeier, 84.
- 17 Sundermeier, *Mission—Gift of freedom*, 77-104.
- 18 T. Sundermeier, 88.

- 19 P. Schmidt-Leukel, 41. A similar critical view is expressed by K. P. Jörns, with the distinction between invisible religions, i.e. the universal history of the perception of God, and the visible ones as religious institutions of emerging religions. Jörns, 70 and 154.
- 20 K. P. Jörns, 46.
- 21 Religious plurality and Christian self-image. This gives a type of interim result from an ongoing ecumenical discussion process and thus is not an official document of the WCC; instead, discussion topics and comments from the churches are solicited. The document can be found at <http://www.oikoumene.org/>.
- 22 Ibid, p.8.
- 23 Refer also to *Over een andere boeg*, op. cit., p.24, where a biblical miniature on the concept of hospitality is given. The concept here becomes a central one for missionary presence.
- 24 Ibid, p.12.
- 25 T. Sundermeier uses the Greek term of “Hodogese” from the story of Phillip in Acts 8 to represent a different type of understanding for which the eunuch bids: not explanation (exegesis) but rather accompaniment on the path. Perhaps it is in the appreciation of other religions while on a path of common commitment in the face of worldwide threats it becomes possible to appreciate the stranger.
- 26 Refer to H.C. Hahn/H. Reichel: *Zinzendorf and the Herrnhut Brethren*, Hamburg, 1977, p.412.
- 27 Specifically because “secular” society is not completely atheistic and because Christians in today’s churches no longer conform without question there are fluent transitions which must be “kept open through communication”. “This however requires the departure from the unrealistic idea that one can live in a communicative yet closed system.” (K. P. Jörns, op. cit., p.79).
- 28 K. P. Jörns loc. cit., p.71

Nicaragua—A Community of Faith

Hans-Beat Motel, Königsfeld

At the end of January 2007, 307 delegates met in Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas) for the Synod of the Iglesia Morava en Nicaragua; it was the fourteenth since becoming an independent province. The official announcement of the conference contained the following words: “The Moravian Church of Nicaragua is a community of faith in Jesus Christ—consisting of various peoples and cultures, Protestant, by

nature oriented to the Gospel, and ecumenically disposed. It promotes and participates in the complete evangelism of Nicaragua and thereby in union with the rest of the Moravian Church declares to the world the Good News of the kingdom of God on which are grounded love for one another, equality of the sexes, and the rights of all people as well as its dedication to social and economic development, medical care, education, and the protection of the environment.”