

Lutherans in Dialogue: Papua New Guinea and Tanzania

The second Study Seminar between Lutheran pastors of Tanzania and Papua New Guinea was held at Makumira Lutheran Theological College in Arusha, Tanzania (August 5-September 15, 1985). However, it is really the third such seminar, for the first one saw a gathering of participants from third-world churches, together with counterparts from Europe and North America, on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession on the home soil of Luther and Lutheranism. As one participant described it: "We came to see the birthplace of Luther and Lutheranism".

But the coming to see had an ulterior motive and a good one. For the colleagues in Papua New Guinea, and other third-world churches, I hope they realised they were making "a grand tour of Rome" (likened to Luther's own tour to Rome), and not just a tribute to historical monuments. It was a gathering that should be rightly called "a return visit" by the brothers and sisters from the third-world churches. It was a visit that has historical significance. For it may be viewed as a mission at a turning point, or a mission at a horizontal level, where we can fully dialogue as equals.

The Seminar in Makumira, Tanzania, followed the theme already established in the Second Seminar in Lae, Papua New Guinea: toward "Lutheran Identity in the Afro-Melanesian Contexts". What is such identity? The questions of identity naturally call into view matters of theology, and confession in those contexts. How does Lutheran theology and doctrine (or Christian for that matter) hold in the emerging churches, as they make the transition from being recipients to being givers; from being under-dogs to being equal partners?

The Makumira Seminar specifically addressed itself to a dozen or so different topics, which were viewed out of the contexts of culture and traditional religions, and their challenge by the gospel and Western traditions. The topics included questions of *revelation in traditional*

society and Christianity; the question of power and the work of the Holy Spirit and spirits; the question of death, and life after death, in traditional society and the Christian faith; suffering, sickness, and healing in traditional society and Christianity; mission and evangelism in multi-religious and multi-cultural societies; and the prophetic role of the church in developing nations.

Even though it was the second seminar between the two churches, the dialogue is still at an exploratory stage, and necessarily so. The fruitful dialogue must grow naturally. Real work has to be done in the respective churches, out of specific contexts in which they live. The results and experience of progress and problems must continue to be shared and dialogued. And joint seminars, such as this one, involving more participation by third-world churches, will be beneficial. This was experienced in the valuable contributions made by Revd Heinz Ehlert, representing the Lutheran church in Brazil, and Professor Gyoji Nabetani, representing the Lutheran church in Japan.

New hopes and possibilities were raised toward theology, in the contexts of these churches, as well as avenues of continued sharing. An excitement was expressed by member of both churches in what may be summarised as affirmation of the oldest dream of Jacob at Bethel: "Truly, God was in Melanesia and Tanzania, and we did not know it". What did he mean to our ancestors, and what does he mean to us now? Having discovered and known *Anutu* in Melanesia and *Mungu* in Tanzania, what should be the response of our church in Melanesia and Tanzania? This, I think, is the essence of our dialogue. Like Jacob's, this response should involve a commitment that should begin in a practical way. And this should be followed through in a deliberate and consistent manner.

Such commitment should involve a memorandum of understanding between the churches involved. It should also include a sharing, in an open and honest way, rather than be defensive of particular views and beliefs. It should involve a readiness to identify needs, and a willingness to share in meeting those needs, and to rejoice together where blessing is due us. This practical approach has already started, where pastors from Papua New Guinea made return visits to the home congregations of counterparts in

Tanzania, to get a first-hand insight of the contexts, of out of which the church lives there. This was done for ten days prior to the presentations of the main study and discussion papers, as well as sharing and exchanging of experiences. Yes, the practical approach does matter seriously.

During visits with a number of congregations, there were some surprises. There were some who said: “We thought your coming meant a white visitor. We did not know there were blacks in Papua New Guinea. But, excuse me, how did you leave Africa and end up over there?” To which a Papua New Guinean participant replied humorously in another group later: “God created all people, and decided to leave whites in Europe, and scattered blacks all over the world.” Behind these sentiments lie deep questions. Can a black really love a black, share with him, and serve him? Whether this is an immediate realisation or not, there is already a proposal for exchange programmes, such as students, seminary teachers, or even pastors. It is up to the churches concerned to explore these possibilities seriously. Dialogue should not be seen as an academic exercise toward a new-breed indigenous theology, but every occasion of dialogue should be an occasion to share our faith.

On the theological level, new challenges begin to emerge, which must be faced realistically. If we are content to say that *Anutu* or *Mungu* was in Melanesia and Tanzania before the coming of the gospel, we must also be able to establish the nature of such revelations in relation to central elements of Christianity and the gospel, viz., salvation, reconciliation, redemption, and the like. Similarly, words and concepts, such as “traditional religions” and “traditional culture”, should be defined or redefined as it is implied, in view of traditional religions and culture under study. This is to help clarify two issues. Firstly, with a view to helping us to distinguish pure animism, though animism is part of the raw material for traditional religious studies. Secondly, studies of culture, as in the case of Melanesia, are not of “a” culture, but of a multiplicity of cultures. It must be substantiated what exactly are the elements and system of the culture referred to. For reference to culture is often generalised.

It is envisaged, and encouraged, that this dialogue may involve more so-called “south-south” dialogue among Lutherans, with a wider scope, but

Melanesian Journal of Theology 1-2 (1985)

it may also be a good foundation for inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogue at home and abroad.

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