From a Mission field to a Mission Force. ELCK Perspectives on Church and Mission

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From a spot to spots

It is now 73 years since the inception of *The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya*, ELCK, in the land of Kenya. The bold and successful mission strategy of Martin Lundström will always be remembered with thanksgiving, for God brought us the message of his love through him. The message which Lundström preached (Rev. 3:20) was about the missionary God who does house to house visitation to the poor and wretched sinners with the view to have fellowship with them. It was thrilling to hear about the Lord who visits His subjects, and a bunch of hearers were brought to faith. Rune Imberg is right to point out that this day, 25th July, 1948, marks the birthday of ELCK.[32] Open-air evangelism became the first approach to Lutheran Mission in Kenya. What began at a spot in *Suneka Market*, spread all over the whole country. Currently, virtually every county has been reached by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, with her members aggregating to 350,000.

ELCK's faith is founded on the Bible, as the standard measure of all matters of faith and life.[33] She also subscribes to the Book of

[32] Rune Imberg, *A Door Opened By the Lord: The History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya* (Örkelljunga : BV-Förlag, 2008), p. 76.

[33] *Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya (ELCK): The Constitution* (Nairobi: Office

Concord, *not in so far* as it is true to the Holy Writ, but *because* it is a clear exposition of the Word of God. We are thankful for the SLM (Swedish Lutheran Mission / Missionssällskapet Bibeltrogna Vänner), who inculcated the culture of reading the Bible confessionally to us and that is the path which hitherto we are treading. It is indelible in my memory how our lectures in the theological college of Matongo did stress on the need to be rooted in the Bible. One of them whom I remember clearly is Roland Gustafsson (later Bishop Roland), whom I will mention here briefly.

When I joined the theological college in September 1988, I met Bishop Roland. He had a wealth of experience in teaching New Testament. Sitting at his feet for lectures was as edifying as it was transforming. Bishop Roland's teaching was Christocentric and not anything, but Bible centered. His answers to students' questions and illustrations got their content either in word for word Bible rendition or a rephrase of the same. You could not remove Roland from his Bible. It is out of bishop Roland's influence as he taught me New Testament Theology, that made me specialize in the New Testament exegesis and finally, missiology.

ELCK Basics on Mission

ELCK has a conviction that mission is not one of her programs, departments or concerns, but rather *the* only program, department and concern she has, i.e. the reason why she exists. Our impetus to mission is anchored in the article upon which the Church stands or falls: the fourth article in the Augsburg Confession. "We cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith."[34] In a world where people want to induce God to accept them, present their positions, education, wealth or piety, as something which merits God's acceptance, we deliberately take them the gracious message of

of the General Secretary, 2008), p. 6.

[34] CA 4:1 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* edited by Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 38–40.

God, that He justifies the ungodly on account of Christ for all those who believe. In his dissertation, Detlev Schulz expresses it clearly that "The article of justification, as the content of the Gospel, expresses God's saving work for all those who are in need of salvation. Thus the article on which the church stands and falls supports and indeed is a mission motive."[35] ELCK therefore is a little flock which heeds the voice of the Saviour, shares and reaches out to the neighbors with God's living Word.

In our confession of the Apostolic creed, "I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord…", ELCK believes that mission starts with God, gets done with God and for God. Christ is the missionary par excellence who has left his glory in heaven, descended here on earth to seek and save the poor miserable sinners. This confession draws us to the fact that Jesus is filled with thirst for the lost, and he is at the ready to spend everything including his own life to redeem, not some but all. Jesus, the missionary God, has only one task for his disciples: to be missionaries to the lost and bring them to Him (Matt. 28:19-20). In this sending, he does not send as a master who stays back waiting for their reports. He goes with them and in them. "I am with you to the end of the ages" (Matt. 28:20). The Lord makes their feet His, their hands His, and so the Lord Himself reaches out through them, for the mission is His.

ELCK therefore takes the mission as the reason for our call and worship. In the divine service, God serves us and empowers us to serve our neighbor. He sets us free from our bondage of sin. In our freedom, we are not free from sinners, but free for sinners. In this way, "the love of God through Christ is given to the entire universe."[36] When that love exists among ourselves, it becomes contagious and magnetic. Those whom we come close to, we attract and point to them the source of the love in us, who is God. Those who come to us, we retain and train in the selfsame Love which indwells us.

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[35] Detlev Klaus Schulz, *The Missiological Significance of the Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions*, (PhD Diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1994), p. 6; cf. <https://scholar.csl.edu/thd/119>, access 211228.

[36] Joseph Ochola Omolo, *Reconciliation in an African Context: Paul's Theology of Reconciliation Engaging Honour and Shame Cultural Elements Among the Gusii, Luhya and Luo people of Western Kenya* (Nairobi, Kenya: Uzima, 2008), p. 41.

Can ELCK Do Mission Work Beyond Her Borders?

This concern was addressed in our "All-Workers Conference" which was held at Atemo in 2018. The text which guided this discussion was "…καὶ ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες ἔν τε Ἰερουσαλὴμ καὶ ἐν πάσῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ καὶ Σαμαρείᾳ καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς" (Acts 1:8).[37] We did realize that the witnesses are not to witness in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, then to the ends of the earth in sequel, as if witnessing to a region depends on the completion of the first. Instead, it should take place simultaneously in all these places as denoted by the connective conjunction *καὶ*. It is against this background that we got a conviction that ELCK must not sit back, wait till the mission work is completed within her borders. In fact, we must go beyond our boundaries now, without waiting for the so called "right season" or "stable economy," as human reason may prefer.

From a Mission Field to a Mission Force

It took only 12 disciples to evangelize the whole world. How much more can ELCK accomplish with more than 350 evangelistic workers? Everyone must see the need that Kenyan men and women who have living faith must rise above their ethnic boundaries and poverty mindset, so that everyone may take the Gospel to anyone. There is no loss in becoming to other countries what SLM became to us. For this church, being a missionary force is not a new ideology. To be exact, it is embodied clearly in ELCK's constitution, which emphasizes mission work through proper Word and sacraments administration to all nations.[38] The struggle toward self-propagating, self-governing, self-supporting and self-theologizing has not been easy for ELCK. The challenges registered thereof have hardened and trained her enough, to enable her be a blessing to others too, even if massive expenses accompany the task thereof.

It is true that mission work needs money, but it is not money first but mission first. Wondimu Game, who is a mission director in

[37] "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (ESV).

[38] ELCK Constitution, p. 7.

the Mekane Yesus Church in Ethiopia, observes it rightly that "When Jesus commissioned and sent the Apostles for the mission, they were poorer than today's African church. The only promise given to them was not a financial account or a fund for mission; it was the hope of the coming of the Holy Spirit." He then adds that "Economic status was not the ultimate determining factor of the early church. The promise of Jesus Christ, to be with his church up to the end of the world matters more than economic standards and the socio-political limitations."[39] The Lord of the harvest, who sends even the ELCK church, will definitely provide whatever this church needs for mission, for God's money for the mission is in the pockets of the believers.

It is in this confidence that we formed a body which will oversee, fundraise for and strengthen the ELCK mission locally and internationally. Kenya has a total population of 47,564,296, according to 2019 census. This would mean that ELCK has only reached 0.74% of the total population. The said body projects that by 2030, it should be able to reach 1,000,000 locally. Internationally, its goal is to send at least five missionaries by that 2030, to the bordering countries. Currently, we are prepared to send one missionary to Uganda, and were it not for the plans' disruption caused by Covid 19, one family would have been to Uganda as a Kenyan missionary.

Conclusion

A 73 year old church is, under normal circumstances, mature enough. She should stop crawling and start walking. This is to say that it must be a church which moves beyond mere maintenance, shifts from looking at itself to looking for others outside the fold. The missionaries from the West laid down all they had in order to spread the Gospel to us. We are convinced that now we must become for others what the Western missionaries become for us. In this endeavor, we welcome all brethren, Westerners and Southerners, to join us, as God gives them

[39] Wondimu Game, *"The Role of the African Church in the 21st Century Global Mission: A case Study of the EECMY Global Mission Venture and Economic Mindset"* (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2020), Master of Art Theology Thesis. Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2020), p. 78. <https://scholar.csl.edu/ma_th/92.https://scholar.csl.edu/ma_th/92.>, access 211228.

the grace, so that we may go together, not as two parties, two races, two churches but as a humble team of witnesses of the love and saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, as *one holy catholic church*.

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