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Encountering Mission

From Brazil to Africa: A Good Personal Experience in God's Mission

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Abstract: Love what you do and love God's people. God's Mission is multifaceted. While some are sent to spread the Gospel and to train local people, others have to stay to do the local mission and to nurture the newly converted. These are the two sides of the same coin. The Gospel is always the same, but cultural issues need to be respected in the way we share the Gospel of Christ. I once read in a book review: "When a book begins with 'I,' I surely will read it. It's not only theory, but life experience." "On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

I Was Sent

In 1973, São Paulo, Brazil, was a huge city of almost 8 million inhabitants with only four established Lutheran congregations. Just graduated, I was sent to plant a church in one of the townships of São Paulo.

I was a foreigner in my own land. I had grown up in the southern part of the country, and my German background was obvious: tall, thin, blue eyes, blonde hair, white skin. There I was, among a mixed people coming from all over Brazil to try for a better life in São Paulo, beginning their life in that new township in very poor conditions. They were African, Japanese, Italian, and even some of German background. It was a different culture from what I was used to, and they spoke with a different accent. It was not easy for my wife either.

There was nothing there but a small room that had been offered to hold a children's Bible class by a friendly family. I would get off the public transportation



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and walk to the mission place, greeting the children who were playing on the dirt road and inviting them to come with me. After the class, I asked them if I could visit their parents. Immediately, their poor houses were open to me and I was warmly received by the parents. I introduced myself, offered a Bible study some evening during the week, and challenged them to invite their neighbors and friends. When I would arrive for Bible study, the small house was packed with people eager to hear what the missionary had to say to them. And the story repeated itself week after week.

I had been trained in a paternalistic way of doing mission. The “mother church” provided everything for the “daughter churches.” One of the professors even used to say: “*Don’t talk about money; people will not come to the church anymore. Don’t worry. . . Missouri will provide for all.*” But when I was sent out as a missionary, the reality showed a different face, and I had to find my own way to do mission.

One of the four established churches was supposed to be the “mother church,” pay my salary, and give support to the mission. After one and half years, they withdrew their financial help due to financial problems, and the Brazilian Synod’s Mission Board couldn’t pay my subsidy. The solution: The Lutheran Hour office needed an assistant pastor, and the position was offered to me. I worked eight hours per day at the office, and after this I went to the township for home visits and Bible studies. On weekends, I had all the other pastoral activities.

After some regular Bible study groups were established, I challenged the people to begin holding services at the small Bible classroom. The first service was held on an Easter Sunday. The room was too small for all the people who attended the service. Some of the local leaders, even though they were not Lutherans, immediately proposed to enlarge the room, and the owner agreed. They bought the materials and did it themselves. We worshiped in this room for three years. My children were baptized there. When I visited the congregation in 2016, what a pleasure it was to see the first child I had baptized and one of the first children from the Bible class being strong leaders of the congregation!

The first adults that confessed the Lutheran Christian faith comprised a portrait of the township and of the future of the church: a Japanese/Brazilian lady, an African/Brazilian couple, and a typical brown mixed Brazilian couple. I always had adult classes, and the church was growing steadily. When the church was officially organized, the first elected elders were the chair: a Japanese/Brazilian; secretary: an African/Brazilian; and treasurer: a German/Brazilian. As the last was illiterate, his wife took over the finances of the new congregation.

From the very beginning, the new members were taught Christian stewardship. It was something new in the Synod, and I adopted it immediately. It worked well. “Their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (2 Cor 8:2). As I was receiving my salary from my job, all local income was put in a bank account. After a while, it

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was decided that the congregation buy a plot and build a bigger room for the church. Everything was donated and no labor was paid; they built the room with their own hands on weekends and holidays.

As I had the same working and free time as the members, they didn't rely on the pastor alone to do visits and mission. They witnessed to their relatives, neighbors, and friends, inviting them to come to the services and taking me to visit with them. I never entered a new house alone: I was always introduced to new prospects by the children or by one of the members or members-to-be.

In short, when the congregation became self-supporting, they asked me to be a full-time pastor. With the help of Forward in Remembrance (LCMS—World Mission plan, 50% x 50%), we bought a bigger plot. Both a church with a basement and a parsonage were built. When I left the congregation after fifteen years of ministry, we had more than three hundred members, and the contributions to the Synod and to the District were outstanding.

Some mission lessons learned through this church planting experience:

- Work with children to lead them to Christ, and reach the parents through the children;
- Home Bible studies are an excellent way to reach the neighborhood;
- Involve local people in God's mission. Don't do it alone;
- Love what you do and love God's people.

Transition

After this experience, I spent ten years as a parish pastor in a mission-minded congregation with a strong children's, youth, and music ministry, followed by eight years as President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, with lots of international connections. These experiences gave me more maturity and a broader vision of mission. When LCMS—World Mission was looking for a pastor/missionary for Kenya, and I was approached as a candidate, my wife and I accepted the call without any hesitations. The Brazilian Lutheran Church **sent me** to Kenya in a partnership with LCMS Alliance Missionary program.

Love what you do
and love God's people.

African Christians in Mission

“In the church of Antioch there were prophets and teachers . . . Simon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene” (Acts 13:1).

The Ethiopian Church understands that Simon was a black man because of his nickname, “Niger,” which means “a black one.” Lucius was from North Africa.

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Maybe both were Jews from the Diaspora, settled in Antioch. Or maybe both were Africans. Even so, the reference to the mixed people gathered at the mission-minded church in Antioch is meaningful!

Africa, which was once the “dark Continent” and the destination of missionaries eager to share Christ with the pagans, is now home to the biggest Lutheran Church bodies: Ethiopia, Tanzania, Madagascar have millions of Lutherans, plus Christians from other denominations, just to mention some countries. Eighty-five percent of the population of Kenya identifies itself as Christian. Is there still place for mission in Africa? Of course, there is, as in any other place! Other millions of people don’t believe in Jesus, and many, living far in the bush and forests, have never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus.

Barnabas and Saul were chosen by the Holy Spirit to be sent to other countries to preach the Gospel. But Simon and Lucius stayed in Antioch to continue the mission, preaching and teaching there in their congregation. The two missions are necessary and important: to go and to stay. Someone has to do the home work!

This is the reality we are experiencing in Mozambique. While some of the pastors are traveling far to share the Gospel in remote villages and towns, most of the pastors-to-be are doing God’s mission in their own village, among their own people.

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I Was Sent to Mozambique

While in Kenya, I heard about a new Lutheran church in Mozambique that began thanks to the efforts of a former refugee who was sent back to his home village by two congregations of the Lutheran Church Canada. I did contact him, and he asked me to help train some local leaders, as Mozambique and Brazil—which are both former Portuguese colonies—speak the same language.

Being aware that the Seminário Concórdia (Brazil) has a Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program, I contacted the church leadership about it, and the Brazilian Church **sent me** to Mozambique to begin a Theological Education Program, using and adapting the TEE material. Eight candidates began the classes in 2010. Some other pastors and professors came from Brazil to help. I didn’t move to Mozambique, but I visit them from time to time for Intensive Training Sessions.

The first eight pastors graduated and were ordained in August of 2015. One thousand people attended this special service—almost all Lutheran members of the ten established congregations. The newly ordained pastors **were sent** to the villages and towns around their churches, and even farther. After one and a half years, they had more than seventy churches and almost eight thousand baptized members. Even some Muslims were converted by the grace of God! It was like a new Pentecost! Most of the churches gather under trees or in straw or mud buildings. Sixty candidates are being trained since 2015, and we hope to graduate some of them in 2020. The church received her official registration from the government in May of 2018. No foreign missionary lives in Mozambique.

As soon as a new mission station is founded, the local people elect a small board and choose one or two people to be their spiritual leaders. Sometimes they are young adults, because they can read and write. (The older generation didn't have the opportunity to go to school.) These candidates receive some orientation from the ordained pastors, along with a Chisena Bible (local tribal language), the Lutheran liturgy, the Bible reading schedule for each Sunday, and the Small Catechism in their own language. Also, they are enrolled in the Theological Education Program (TEP). From that moment on, they are recognized and respected as the future pastor of that village. The candidate leads the services, he teaches the children, youth, and adults, and he practices what he learns at the TEP. The practical goes hand in hand with the studies. The candidates don't have a specific internship period, but it happens during all the time they are studying, under supervision of the ordained pastor in charge of that area. And they are supported in their work by other local leaders who are not being trained to be pastors. The Royal Priesthood of All Believers is something natural among them. Everyone witnesses, everyone wants to offer a prayer during the service, everyone leads the songs. They don't wait for the pastor to come to celebrate a service. They have services every Sunday and other activities with the pastor and without the pastor.

Jesus was not accepted when He came back to His hometown of Nazareth, and He stated that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (Lk 4:24). But, amazingly, this is not what is happening in Mozambique. In my point of view, this is a new concept of mission because it doesn't cost any money to send and to maintain a missionary in that place. The candidate has his own house, he has his own little farm (*machamba*) that provides food for himself and for his family, and all he needs is to attend the training sessions from time to time until he is ordained and is able to offer also the Sacraments. And he will stay in his place as pastor, without need of subsidy or salary. What the congregation collects is used for special expenses of needy people (health issues) and for some travel expenses. During this time of study and preparation, the ordained pastor in charge of that region comes once every month to offer the Sacraments and to preach.

The candidates are chosen among those who fulfill the criteria of 1 Timothy 3. They need to have a good witness of the local community, be husband of but one wife (polygamy is still very common in Mozambique), and above reproach. Not all of them will graduate and be ordained. That depends on their skills and if they pass the exams. But the fact that not all will be ordained does not discourage them to witness Christ. “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Mt 12:34).

This experience also gives another dimension to the mission of God. In a biblical sense, there is nothing new under heaven. Paul advised Timothy and Titus to choose faithful people to be elders among the leaders of the communities that they were leading (Ti 1:5). While Paul, Barnabas, and others were traveling from place to place, sharing the Good News, planting churches, and visiting some places again to strengthen the Christian community, others were overseers among their own people, like Simon called Niger and Lucius of Cyrene.

What We Can Learn From This Experience

We have lost that dimension of mission, and the churches are still spending a lot of money sending missionaries from America and other developed countries to the so-called Third World. Of course, some need to go to begin the mission and to train the local people. But just think about how many missionaries are well settled in good houses, while the people are living in extreme poverty and there is no real connection between the missionary and the people he wants or tries to reach. One mission sponsor told me that, when he had the opportunity to visit the missionary he was sponsoring in Africa, he was shocked to see that the missionary was living in better conditions than he himself.

Also, how many Mission Teams are sent every year to do work that the local people are able to do, like building, painting, cleaning, etc.? The benefit and the experience are more for the Mission Team than for the local people, as I already read in some mission books and heard from volunteers. Why not just send a coach to train the local people and help them to do what they are able? And to accept their way of living and of worshiping, without imposing our Western culture?

Some of these questions don't have answers now. These are just some reflections about the current situation. The model doesn't always work the same in all places.

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Theological Education cannot be a program by itself. It is a Mission Project, as every candidate is a herald to proclaim Christ to all. Even if the candidate doesn't conclude the training or is not ordained for other reasons, he shares what he knows and believes: Christ! We are called not just to maintain what is there, but to expand the kingdom of God among us and around the world.

Obstacles/Weaknesses

The model that we are proposing to Mozambique is not a fixed one, and it needs to be confirmed. Unfortunately, the beginning of the mission sponsored by some Lutheran churches in Canada was paternalistic. The first eight candidates received a stipend, and they became used to it. When the mission was handed over to the Brazilian Lutheran Church—IELB, an agreement was made with the graduated and just ordained pastors: They would receive a small monthly stipend and some help for travel expenses until a new class graduates. This is now ongoing, and every year the subsidy is reduced until 2020, when new candidates will graduate and be ordained. Let's see how it will work.

Also, most of the churches are in rural areas, existing in very primitive conditions, without electricity or running water. The people live in straw huts. The church gathers under trees or in straw or mud chapels built by the local people. These buildings usually collapse during the strong summer rainy season. Some places have brick churches, built in partnership: The local people make the bricks and help with the labor. To buy cement, timber, etc., they receive a grant of \$5,000 from the IELB or from a special fund that the mission has at the LCMS Office of International Mission, thanks to some faithful donors. Having a brick church gives credibility to the congregation, and the local community trusts that this church has come to stay.

The Theological Education Program meets twice every year at the Lutheran Training Center in Sena on the shore of the Zambezi River, bought by the FELSISA—Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa. It was a former game camp. The students sleep on mats, the classes are held under trees, and the tutors have a brick hut with a bed to sleep. Food is prepared on ground fires. There is a generator for electricity that sometimes doesn't work, and the water comes from the river, which is infested by crocodiles, making it really dangerous to pick up water from the river. Also, hippopotamuses infest the river. Several communities are asking for water wells, because people have been eaten by crocodiles while picking up water from the river. Twenty-five people were eaten in a year just in one congregation. We got a sponsorship to drill a water well for them. Others are still waiting.

Malaria is another big problem for the local people and especially for the guest professors. Three of my Brazilian colleagues got malaria while teaching there. I was spared so far, thanks be to God.

Our Strength

“Our competence comes from God.” I’m sure of this, and I have experienced it during all my ministry. This was the motto of my graduation and is the motto of my ministry. “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are *competent* in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our *competence* comes from God. He has made us *competent* as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:4–6; emphasis added).

Training pastors in Mozambique and now also at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tshwane, Pretoria, South Africa, is an opportunity that God gives me to share Christ and my mission experiences. In Him I trust, and to Him all the glory.