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For the Growth of the Church and the Transformation of the World

On the dynamics in theology and organization of UEM as an ecumenical missionary communion

1. Church and mission related at a new level of quality (Historical and theological evaluation)

When in summer 1996 the United Evangelical Mission was transformed from a regional German missionary society into an international church communion in the service of mission, this was assessed in different ways. There was confidence at finally having stepped onto the path of a tangible partnership, but there were also doubts. In the light of intercultural decision finding processes, practical questions arose concerning the future strain for management and administration. But there were also basic inquiries such as the question whether an obsolete mission institution was perhaps struggling to survive by changing into a multinational mission corporation with "western structures" and a head office in Wuppertal. If this were the case, ran the criticism, the former "mission churches" in the South would be incorporated in a new style as "business partners", but still not in a less "colonial" way.¹

Whatever the judgment on the UEM may be after these 13 years, the historical documents show quite clearly: It was not founded in the first place for reasons of organization but for the pursuit of a common vision and mutual respect. Here, after decades of theological ripening, a *consensus* on basis and method of mission as well as intensive negotiations about a common *strategy* had sought and found their appropriate organizational *structure*.²

¹ Concerning the latter compare above all: H. Luther, *Arbeitsstrukturen ZMiss* 4/1996, 249 ff.

² Cf. P. Sandner, *Der Weg zur Internationalisierung der UEM. Erinnerungen*, Wuppertal 2007. The historical comparison of CEVAA, WMM, and UEM by K. Funkschmidt titled "Earthing the vision", Frankfurt 2000, very valuable due to its profound investigation, emphasizes this aspect in accordance with its title.

- a. The **consensus** of mission theology states that mission does not work from North to South or vice versa, but engages the entire church of Jesus Christ all over the world in conveying the message of reconciliation to all mankind.
- b. The **strategy** leading to the reform of the UEM was: a legal and financial frame set by European churches or associations can no longer dictate what is possible for a common understanding on the Gospel and its effects (donor-recipient structure). On the contrary, this frame must be shaped by listening to each other and giving mutual advice.
- c. In terms of **structure**, this led to the transformation of a mission agency of German Protestant churches into an international communion of churches and institutions dedicated to mission.

Many people were impressed that the association had a structure characterized by a Christian spirit, grounded on a time-tested theological basis (constitution) and capable of reacting in a flexible way to questions of international ethics (human rights). These qualities prove that it was not mere pragmatism that made the members join, but that they felt the obligation to act in common because of their common destination (cf. Acts 4:20) and common history.³ This process⁴ has added an interesting chapter to the history of the relationship between church and mission. Since the beginning of Protestant “overseas mission” by the missionaries from Halle and Denmark in South India some 300 years ago, Protestant churches and organized world mission sometimes criticized and sometimes ignored each other, and sometimes they had phases of mutual attraction. Already in 1938, at the World Missionary Conference at Tambaram / India, the delegates had on principle agreed upon a stronger allocation of world missionary responsibility to the **churches** (instead of private or other public communities as before). This programmatic change took some time to be implemented⁵; the first step was a cooperation of regional church-related missionary societies in Europe, based on geographical considerations.

³ This common history has aspects of shame and grief that have to be commemorated and emphasized over and over again in the present atmosphere of reconciliation (such as five years ago on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the war of extermination which the German colonial power waged against the Herero and other peoples in Namibia). The common history, however, also recalls early occurrences of reconciliation in theology and cooperation in partnership; cf. P. Sandner, Weg 4, or in the history of Bethel Mission: E. Johanssen, Bilder aus einer entstehenden evangelischen Christenheit in Ostafrika, Evangelisches Missionsmagazin 1927, H. 1, 18 – 22.

⁴ By now, we may speak of an established “process” and not only of a “project”, as it was called in Funkschmidt’s Vision 300-346 because of its coincidence with the official foundation.

⁵ This is valid despite the integration of IMC as a union of missionary societies with the WCC in New Delhi in 1961; cf. O. Schumann, ZMiss, 4/1996, 202.

At Bangkok in 1973, the unilateral north-south directed missionary work was radically questioned, giving rise to the emergence of a growing number of direct church partnerships. It became obvious that the institution of "regional missionary societies" could only be an interim solution. Therefore it was only consistent for the churches and institutions united in the 'Vereinigte Evangelische Mission' to entrust the mandate of missionary work to a network of responsibility within a communion of churches – after a process of consultation that lasted for 18 years (from 1978, Bethel consultation, until 1996, Bethel UEM General Assembly).

The partners in charge of the reform process fulfilled their tasks with very careful reflection⁶, taking their time to discuss experiences, new concepts and new structures, yet without coming to a standstill.

- a) They allowed as many levels as possible within the partner institutions to take part in the consultations (synods, but also leading clergy were often involved⁷).
- b) They sought advice and evaluation from competent advisors with expertise and experience in the field of cooperation (assessments by EMW 1993 and by WCC).
- c) And they realized at an early stage that regional structures had to be allowed sufficient importance within the future communion.⁸

So who is the UEM today?

The UEM is a growing communion of churches and institutions united by a joint history of mission, dedicated to give mutual help in dealing with the present-day missionary challenges. In this communion, the associated churches and institutions share their understanding and responsibility for passing on the Gospel in word and deed. Such sharing of responsibility signifies for those who are in some way dominant, e. g. by material superiority, the willingness to forego the exercise of power, clearly demonstrating the new quality of ecumenical coexistence. The mandate to manage this communion has been transferred to a supra-church level, while safeguarded by the competence of the General Assembly, consisting mainly of Church representatives, to determine its constitution and guidelines.

⁶ Reckoning from 1996, some three decades of searching for an adequate partnership structure preceded this process. However, from 1973 onwards, first suggestions were to be heard from responsible reformers (Menzel 1973; deVries 1975; G. Jasper jun. 1976) which led in the direction of the UEM process, which gained distinct contours from 1988 on; cf. JBM 1976, 46 – 65 as well as Funkschmidt, Vision 30 ff. Likewise remarked by P. Sandner, Weg 11 and others, and K. Funkschmidt, Structures and Theology, IRM XCI, 2002, 397.

⁷ From my church alone Bishop Dr. Jung in Mühlheim, 1988; Bishop Prof. Dr. Zippert in Ramatea, 1993.

⁸ Thus already recorded by V. Jung in an observation (JBM 1996, 218) as an asset in the development of the UEM in comparison to CEVAA

Careful documentary examination of the development leading to the new UEM reveals the urgent concern not to destroy the churches' consciousness for their own *responsibility for mission* that had only just begun to grow, by forming an independent, international hyper-structure comparable to former associations or societies outside the churches.⁹ At the same time, given the tendency to regard mission as a special or cross-sectional function of ecclesial expression or simply a process of mutual self-help between churches, it had to be borne in mind that *church and mission are never completely identical*.¹⁰ Mission is *not* owned by the churches, even though – or rather precisely because the church represents the indispensable historical fellowship of faith through the power of the mission of reconciliation of God in Christ and through the one Christian baptism.

It is, among other things, the *basic Protestant understanding of church* which ensures that the new UEM communion pays attention to both those basic insights. The churches and institutions associated in UEM share this basic understanding as expressed in the constitution. According to this basic understanding, the church is in itself created by the reconciling word of God addressed to the sinner. Thus the church herself *is already mission*, as she struggles to give shape to the Word by listening and answering as well as in the mutual sharing of her members. That takes place even before and during the exercise of her responsibility for her activity in the world, namely for the *mission she has*. For whenever the members of the church of Jesus Christ as well as the different historical churches in the fellowship of the worldwide body of Christ share their gifts, they never share just themselves. As a Eucharistic communion they share the grace of reconciliation and peace with God, a grace reaching beyond this communion towards all mankind.¹¹

In terms of theology, "**mission**" can therefore be defined as **a communication process in which the fellowship of reconciliation between God and humans, and between human and human, is created and renewed**. As such it serves the Word by which the church is born and which she translates for all

⁹ Cf. an analogous undertaking, though in a completely different process with different results, in Basel Mission ZMiss 4/1996, 217 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. in this connection the discussion of Bishop J. Kibara's suggestion (1978) to integrate such a dedicated missionary communion into the structures of confessional world alliances in Funkschmidt, Vision 275 f.

¹¹ Learning to honour the sharing of gifts, thus sharing one another with all the joys and worries of life, is an essential learning process within missionary existence of churches; cf. H. W. Huppenbauer, ZMiss 4/1996, 214 – 216; cf. K. Funkschmidt, Vision 7, 56, 59, 60f.

mankind. This dialogue between God and human is mediated by the Holy Scripture, conducted in brotherly and sisterly consultation, and serves to create and renew the church.¹²

¹² In this process the church is no more – and no less – than offspring and steward of mission. This is reflected in the UEM constitution in § 2(1) by the statement that this community relies on its being “(founded) on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament” and on this basis shall “serve the purpose of joint action in mission”.

2. Great Ideals! Flexible Strategies? Adequate Resources?

(Present-day concerns)

The UEM partners make great demands on themselves: They want to take seriously both the world-wide dimension of the Christian church including her mutual responsibilities as well as the fact that in the end Christian mission can always only take place regionally or locally.

However, these great demands might quickly put too great a strain on the personal and economical resources which are nowadays rather being reduced than expanded.¹³ Up to now, it 'turned out all right' because the churches which are multilaterally connected in the association also gave indirect and exemplary vitality to the UEM process by taking care of their bilateral relations. Nonetheless, during the first decade in which the new structure was put into practice many questions came up, some of which have not been thoroughly discussed, let alone resolved. Yet they have already allowed small steps in the process of organizational reform.¹⁴

The crucial questions shall be dealt with in the following sections:

- Have the essential *goals* of church communion in mission been consistently pursued, adequately discussed and jointly modified (see section 3)?
- Have the *concepts, strategies*, and the new *overall structure* proved successful? Has it been possible to preserve acceptance and active cooperation in all churches and institutions involved? Which modifications have already been made (see s.4)?
- What are the *future challenges* within the entire ecumenical network and how are they to be met (see s.5)?

3. A growing church and a fairer society!

(Clarification of goals)

Referring to chapter 2 above and to the insights of recent research in mission theology, we should first clarify the goals of Christian mission. Therefore, within the overall mission theological situation named above, it is necessary first of all to distinguish between the eschatological horizon of the *missio Dei* as a whole, which

¹³ Especially by German members! The UEM-specific nature of ecumenical partnership in comparison to other ecumenical unions (CEVAA and CWM) that have existed for some 150 years (p. 175 – 179), is presented in a plausible manner by J. Wietzke JBM 1993 but also critically assessed with regard to potential strains for the various planes of ecumenical work in the churches involved (179 – 181).

¹⁴ So at the General Assembly in Borkum/Germany June 2008.

is part of the gift granted by God within His act of salvation through Jesus Christ, and the objectives defined for the *missio ecclesiae* within this horizon. Whoever does not make this distinction will always run the risk of confusing the basic theological and eschatological conditions of church and mission with the diverse forms of missionary activities of the church.

The eschatological horizon of the *missio Dei* encompasses the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ (Luke 4:18 f; John 20:21) and the present eternal salvation by the assurance of justification for the sinner (John 3:16), and it represents as a whole the condition enabling ecclesiastical mission, indeed the entire existence of the Church. This horizon together with its related effects enables the Church and all her members to fulfill the task of missionary action in this world, the *missio ecclesiae*. Due to the eschatological horizon this mission has two goals which should not be played off against each other as may be seen in the current debate about the competition between “missionary” and “development” agencies in the EKD¹⁵:

Goal 1 Growth and renewal of the church, by winning people for the communion of believers and to a fellowship in accordance with the word that is preached, listening to God and to each other and helping one another accordingly, and

Goal 2 The development of social life in the service of mankind, as the church – for example with diaconal services – sets the signs for more equitable politics and economics, in the sense of the reign of peace in the Kingdom of God introduced by Christ.

It has to be emphasized: Neither of these two goals is beyond the eschatological horizon of *missio Dei*. That is the origin, justification, and motivation of the call to

¹⁵ However, it may be proved here how helpful it is to distinguish between the two goals, besides the a. m. distinction between an eschatological horizon of mission and its goals of activity. The two goals of mission, namely “church growth” and “social development”, are necessarily distinct, yet closely connected, so that it is clear: both goals and tasks have to be understood, from a theological point of view, as constituent parts of church mission, even though they fulfil the mission of Christ in different ways and with different cooperation partners. A certain confusion regarding the determination as well as separation of goals for both expressions of mission had come up during the last decades, mainly because Western mission theology was still suffering from its mission history, which was perceived as compromising, and therefore hesitated to define mission as church activity. They preferred to withdraw behind the formula of the *missio Dei*, as it were behind an impenetrable eschatological reservation against all further determinations of mission, instead of preserving both differentiation and connection between *missio Dei* and *missio ecclesiae* and defining for the latter the most urgent necessities. More is to be said in this connection at a different place, since that would go beyond the scope of the UEM topic in this article.

"repentance and new life", as it says in Paragraph 2 of the UEM Constitution, whether referring to the renewed life given to justified sinners in the communion of Christ or to the renewal of stewardship of God's creation resulting from it. But something else applies: Neither of these two goals is independent of the other, since in both cases the healing action of the Triune God is transported with and through the church, either by preaching or - by her very existence - demonstrating freedom. When the Gospel is directed to what the church from her perspective regards as "outsiders", offering them an impulse to transform their lives, this process is usually designated as "Mission" and often clothed in phrase such as "church is always church for others". Nonetheless it is very important to make sure that a further goal is not neglected, namely the invitation to join up in the body of Christ in the form of a specific and binding membership in a church.

It is certainly easier to stipulate the goals of Christian mission than to make them compatible with one's own existence, or even to achieve them methodically and then to check them off as "accomplished".¹⁶ We would be happy if we could always radiate the great joy effected by the Gospel simply by using our specific character as individuals and institutions - for the benefit of the church and society as a whole. But a mission of continuous "radiation" for which people occasionally enthuse in glowing terms is just not at our disposition. We cannot construct "credible speech and life"; we can only expose ourselves to God's endearing love by our daily study of the letter and spirit of reconciliation - in spite of, indeed in view of our limitations and failures¹⁷.

There is no mission without a specific echo within the body of Christ in the form of a temporal church. What good to us - and to all those who are waiting for the best news of all - is a private and personal confession of faith, or one which can only be communicated "at all" within an elite international group, but not put into specific practice in a local church?!¹⁸ This goal of inviting people to come to our

¹⁶ People believed in this possibility at the very beginning of the world mission movement, cf. J. Mott in Edinburgh 1910, as well as later on when development was regarded optimistically. In the course of the past century, however, all the world's churches had to learn that this mission could not be fulfilled in a historical period of time; cf. the title (transl.) 'Mission accomplished?' of the Jahrbuch Mission 2009 that will come out these days.

¹⁷ Within the framework of our limitations we should have confidence in this love granted to us in the power of the kingdom of God. We know that our human and organizational resources are limited, also as a missionary community. So we can only cope if we share our and other people's talents, accepting them as God's gifts for us all. Therefore we may boldly define the specific cooperation in a temporal church as the place designated for the mission invitation.

¹⁸ Especially in the year 2009, when Calvin's 500th birthday anniversary coincides with the 75th anniversary of the Barmen Theological Declaration, the UEM would be well advised to make conscious use of a reformed tradition

churches should be more strongly emphasized in a missionary church communion such as the UEM¹⁹.

4. More room for action, without loss of participation (The process will continue)

Three factors mentioned in chapter 1 have to be coordinated continuously²⁰ in a recurring cycle of checks: (a) common concepts of content, (b) common strategies and (c) common structures.

The latest example of this adaptation process can be named here. In the first 8-10 years the UEM management and advisory bodies concentrated their attention on the strengthening of parliamentary structures of participation. The objective was to create a system allowing all partners the most equitable representation through their delegates, respecting the various regions, ages, occupations and genders, and this aim has been steadily followed with growing success. On the other hand the questions concerning the concept and content of missionary and ecumenical work or modern and effective working strategies were pushed into the background.²¹

Soon, however, it became necessary to correct this tendency to emphasize structural reforms.²² Thus the responsible bodies had to focus on the review of concepts and strategies. This investigation revealed that, in addition to intensifying specific areas of cooperation such as the social services, more attention should be

which is strongly represented in some of its partners' history, according to which the church's order is part of her nature and therefore has to be shaped in line with the Gospel. – On the subject of exaggeration of outward orientation (centrifugal trend) within mission cf. Funkschmidt Vision 187.

¹⁹ In more general comments, regard for local "missionary situations" in the different churches among the members was named as *desideratum* or chance for the process from the very beginning of the UEM process; cf. U. Beyer JBM 1993, 184 and JBM 1994, 202, as well as Wietzke, JBM 1993, 178, 180. Yet the members' mutual support as well as necessary mutual help in finding methods of adequate contextual evangelisation has hardly been specifically worked on anywhere. In the past years, it seemed as if the task of congregational development had nothing to do with the missionary concept of the UEM communion, namely its worldwide missionary orientation. This can be illustrated by the reaction of Indonesian UEM members to proposals by Rev. Währisch-Oblau in the year 2008: "We never knew that UEM is engaged in such kind of work ..." (Conversation in Missionshaus Wuppertal, 20 February, 2009). First signs of a change in direction are recognizable in the strategy paper of the Region Germany within the UEM dated 2007.

²⁰ This can also be gathered from the continuing further inquiries about the adequacy of structures on the occasion of consultations, as early as the development phase between 1978 and 1996.

²¹ That this might be a potential problem is already hinted at in Funkschmidt's impressions (1998) of the first two years of UEM work, cf. Vision 269.

²² In times of careful resource sharing fundamental questions could not be overlooked, such as the following (at least since the GA in Manila in 2004): "What actually comprises the common understanding of mission which binds us together in a special fellowship such as ours?" Or: "Do we need our mission societies as a second type of development agency alongside others?"

paid to the common task of missionary congregational development in the interests of the growth of church life in every region. The new UEM programs had to meet this priority without abandoning the indispensable claim of a holistic, practical witness to the Gospel. This may be made easier in that UEM is not a communion of churches in every respect.²³

5. Contextual Mission in Ecumenical responsibility

(Focal points for future cooperation)

Even in the early stages of growing together the UEM communion was spoken of as "exemplary ecumenism".²⁴ Today we must take a new look to see in which way the UEM might be considered exemplary.

Presupposing that this is the case, in this final chapter I would like to propose two special areas of work corresponding to the two goals of the Church's mission mentioned above to be emphasized (5.2.1 and 5.2.2).

Before that I would like to outline once again the points which make the UEM particularly interesting and relevant for ecumenical theology (5.1).

5.1. UEM as 'exemplary' in terms of new criteria of quality for ecumenical fellowship

The *proprium* of UEM lies primarily in the mature partnership in mission which is vital for the Church, specifically in the fields of church growth and world responsibility. It is by no means self-evident that this cooperation takes place irrespective of general cultural borders and inner-Protestant denominational boundaries. Growing together in this ecumenical communion can only work if both these cross-border dimensions are consciously tackled.

For this purpose it is ideal that this communion which is exemplary for the entire church only comprises a limited number of partners who know each other well from their bilateral partnerships.²⁵ For here it is impossible to neglect within the

²³ This claim – which is not achievable – is still suggested by the UEM subtitle „communion of churches in three continents“ (see constitution, § 1), quite apart from the fact that not all its members are churches.

²⁴ Ulrich Beyer, In einem Boot, JBM 1993, 182 – 186.

²⁵ From the beginning of the UEM process there was a call for improved quality of partnerships in a manageable but multilateral framework; cf. Beckmann, ÖR 31, 1982, 68 – 75.

relevant context the latent cultural and economic differences existing between the partners. And wherever there are concrete religious encounters there is no way of avoiding the doctrinal theological differences which still exist, for example baptismal theology or the ordinances of church life (e.g. ordination and issues of ministry). They have to be treated in such a way that they do not, as so often in the history of the Church, act as a hindrance to the interaction in church fellowships which are existentially necessary.

Admittedly, issues repeatedly arise which pose questions to the traditional ecumenical thinking which has developed notably in the churches of the Northern Hemisphere, such as the following: Is it actually possible to build a strong network of church fellowship – albeit for a specific purpose – cutting across theological doctrinal differences?

Of course, at this point the UEM communion as a whole could say: Is it not so that our communion nowadays is much more involved in questions of inter-cultural and ethical differences and means of overcoming them than dealing with doctrinal differences?

Going deeper into that issue they will discover: Only when both, ethical and doctrinal criteria for authentic ecumenism have been considered in their intrinsic connection, can one investigate the specific depth of theology which is possible in the UEM communion and ask: In what modern form do our traditional doctrinal differences appear within the family of Protestant churches today? – To take a particular example, this question might be posed like this: How do the members of this communion manage to do justice to the equal dignity and capability of receiving the vocation to preach the gospel for all who have been baptized (whether they are “men or women, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free”; cf. Gal. 3:28)?

5.2 Two special areas of work in the future

5.2.1. “Church growth” - missionary congregational formation after intercontextual consultation

The aim designated above as “church growth” has already been emphasized as one central focus of the UEM cooperation. With their sharing “*koinonia*”-structure the UEM partners should not only act as witnesses for the society around them in

an increasingly globalized world.²⁶ This structure should also act as an invitation to the classical theological fellowship in word and sacrament (CA VII).

All the partners need a renewal of real church life in their own area. The partners in the Northern hemisphere are particularly suffering from the loss of members due to demographic and socio-cultural developments. For the partners in the South the limits of church growth are experienced not so much with regard to membership gain, but rather with regard to their being grounded and rooted in their own culture. For example, will there be enough candidates called to and qualified for full-time service in the event that international partners withhold their financial assistance?

Both religious contexts are still challenged by new mentalities of charismatic piety that are spreading all over the globe. They must demonstrate self-confidence and be prepared to learn.

The conditions for attractive preaching, for dialogue oriented towards the target group and also for the active participation of many members of the congregation in shaping church life can however only be assessed regionally.²⁷ The Gospel wants to help each individual human to find new impetus and enthusiasm in his specific life situation.²⁸ It is necessary both to "regain" existing church members as well as to recruit new members among those who had hitherto been living outside the church.²⁹

In planning appropriate strategies for congregational formation the UEM partners ought to look over one another's shoulders. In particular, representatives of partner churches with the same denomination, but differing cultural and social contexts, have an eye for the right mix of impartiality and sympathy for the concerns of the local church. Admittedly, for the German UEM partners it might also mean getting involved not just with representatives of the UEM partner

²⁶ As the UEM has postulated since its internationalization (strengthened by the World Mission Conference in St. Antonio, 1989; cf. the remarks by P. Sandner regarding this process of mutual stimulation, experience, processes of UEM restructuring, *Erinnerungen*, p. 18).

²⁷ This factor of regional charisma has been recommended to the UEM communion in comments on the process from the very beginning; e. g. by V. Jung JBM 1996, 217, 219.

²⁸ This was called to mind by T. Sundermeier in his ceremonial lecture 'Mission – Kraft der Erneuerung' on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the Rhenish Missionary Society here in Wuppertal in 2003.

²⁹ This is stated by my own regional church in a study on recruiting new members dated 2005, titled "Anderen begegnen. Mitglieder gewinnen".

churches, but also with members of a congregation with a foreign language and origin in their own neighborhood. However, it appears questionable whether an advisory team should be solely composed of representatives of churches living in the same social context, who are thus potential competitors, since Protestant churches and foreign-language congregations are often wary of making contact because of their differing forms of piety.

One should also be skeptical about the suggestion that models of spiritual life and congregational growth can be directly transferred across cultural boundaries. At first the demonstration of the exotic but non-transferable model³⁰ may create a great mutual impression, but the advisory teams should give serious priority to the translation of concepts and methods into the other contexts. The goal must be mutual assistance in finding a context-oriented missionary model, for which the local church alone ultimately has to take responsibility, even if it was unmistakably inspired by the advice of "third parties".³¹

A recent experiment showed how helpful a multilateral consultative communion of partners can be for a German Protestant church, when church partners in Africa and Asia gave their advice on the missionary conditions in the North Elbian Church.³² Similar consultations could be organized by the UEM.

5.2.2. "The development of social life" - Partnership projects in diaconia and development

The principal implementation of that goal of Christian mission defined as "church development service" can at present be found in the churches' efforts for a reconciled coexistence of the peoples in the northern and southern hemispheres, both politically and economically. Here the members of the UEM communion can

³⁰ Thus, it wouldn't make much sense to directly continue the former models of evangelistic teams which had not proved successful in the 70s of the 20th century, neither in the shape of JafM teams at the UEM 1978 (cf. Funkschmidt Vision 276 f.) nor in the shape of the AACs in the CEVAA society which developed an analogous international structure.

³¹ The French nun Françoise Sterlin is a good example of such intercontextual learning. One day, during her service in Congo, she asked herself: "What do I get from the Africans?" A strange, yet understandable question which she answered for herself emphatically in a way which I can well understand after having lived in Tanzania myself some ten years ago: "I discovered", she continued, "the liveliness of the church in Zaire which was just attempting to inculturate the Gospel in her country. I discovered a church sparkling with life, services that dealt with real everyday life, lay people leading local congregations, a bishop and a people who dared to adapt Christian life to the needs of their country. Until today, I have been influenced by witnesses like Cardinal Malula. Although my family and my education were unequivocally Christian, I owe to Africa the desire and the taste of building up church together with others. Only as a foreigner did I discover the significance of my baptism. Africa has converted me to the church." quoted according to H. Müller, F. Sterlin, in JBM 2003, 148 (also recorded in Sundermeier, Mission, ceremonial lecture 2003, 11).

³² See church office of the North Elbian Church, documentation, esp. p. 15 ff.

make an exemplary contribution as a fellowship of partners who have been freed from past guilt and reconciled with one another. That starts with the way they treat one another, being able to freely advise and correct their co-workers as brothers and sisters, without having to worry that their objective, but possibly uncomfortable criticism would lead to veiled allegations of "colonialism" or, in the other direction, "under-development".³³ – At the same time this fellowship as believers reconciled in Christ has an effect on the conscious handling of the partners' commonly shared history – a history of mission and church development, but also of violence. This effect may take place in an exemplary fashion in commemorative years such as 2004 or 2006, when a living testimony is required in a world "torn" by revenge and violence (UEM Constitution § 2).

Finally, however, this reconciled cooperation has to take on tangible shape in present-day development projects. In the face of the global financial crisis of a hypertrophic economy, there is a growing political recognition that ethical responsibility for business processes can only be achieved by means of a renewed connection between economic, mostly monetary transactions and the material values of supply and trading. But this re-linking can never work without the involvement of each region concerned. In this situation, regional projects carried out by a partnership of churches, businesses and educational institutions such as universities can provide new impulses for self-development of a local society. Issues such as "youth unemployment" or "decentralized energy supply" are certainly equally topical in the North and the South, so that joint advisory teams with a high degree of intercultural and inter-regional knowledge and expertise would be just as useful in this field as in the case of congregational formation outlined above.³⁴

With specific cooperation in these two fields of church mission the UEM communion can do excellent ecumenical work.

³³ Cf. W. Richebächer, Mitarbeiterbrief UEM 1999, 14 – 21.

³⁴ Cf. a cooperation project between the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck, the University of Kassel, and business enterprises in the region with the aim of supporting regional structures in Hessen in connection with development projects of partner churches in the South, entitled "Wirtschaften im Dienst der Menschen", Kassel 2008.