

## **Reframing Mission in Cameroon Today- Perpetua B.N. Fonki, PhD**

I had a very interesting encounter with the wife of an American Baptist missionary who is stationed in the North Western Region of Cameroon. This meeting actually acted as fuel for the missionary perspectives that we will be exploring today. I had spent four days in Akwaya a very aboriginal area in Cameroon, which is still protected either by poverty or selective governance from the easiveness of modern technology. The chief had invited me for breakfast before my departure back to the city (Buea) and I was fortunate to meet two Baptist pastors from the United States who had come as missionaries to that area. They had come to the chief's palace because they wanted some land to build their church on. The land was given to them with neither sweat, nor a written application.

The road to the city from Ballin is a continuous rollercoaster ride that lasts for about eight hours, so the chief asked if they could offer me a ride in their little aircraft. I was very fortunate to have this privileged offer, but the most interesting part of the journey was an encounter with the wife of one of the pastors who engaged me in aggressive evangelism, the moment we landed. We exchanged a few pleasantries and she began quizzing me on the gospel, and Christ, and salvation, and being saved. She gave me absolutely no chance to share my own faith convictions with her, and after exhausting my patience, I seized a few minutes to introduce myself and what I did. I thought the conversation would take a different turn at this moment. It did of course but this time, she queried me on why I was a pastor; stating categorically that I was not Christian enough and should step down for the men because I was disobeying the Bible. My aggressive gospel preacher friend started with a doctrinal divergence, counting every reason why I was wrong and she was

right. As I walked away from the airstrip to catch a taxi, I kept wondering what the right terminology was for my friend's mission to Cameroon.

That moment, I again concurred with primeval mission specialist Warren, (1958) who states that *“Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.”* My definition of mission in contemporary Cameroon is certainly miles away from her modus operandi. I even wondered whether I could have been converted to Christianity by her using that methodology, had I not been a Christian.

This unfortunate experience from my perspective is not a mirror of what mission is or has been. Missionary legacy is plagued with a lot of good, selfless Christians who paved the way for current Christianity and mission work. What was mission, what is mission and what will mission be? This brings me to a reflection on the text of the World Mission Conference, (1910) which states:

"It is a startling and solemnizing fact that even as late as the twentieth century the Great Command of Jesus Christ to carry the Gospel to all mankind is still so largely unfulfilled. It is a ground for great hopefulness that, notwithstanding the serious situation occasioned by such neglect, the Church is confronted to-day, as in no preceding generation, with a literally world-wide opportunity to make Christ known. There may have been times when in certain non-Christian lands the missionary forces of Christianity stood face to face with as pressing opportunities as those now presented in the same fields, but never before has there been such a conjunction of crises and of opening of doors in all parts of the world as that which characterises the present decade. It is likewise true that never on the home field have the conditions been more favourable for waging a campaign of evangelisation adequate in scope, in thoroughness, and in power. Therefore, the first duty of a World Missionary Conference meeting at such an auspicious time is to consider the present world situation from the point of view of making the Gospel..."

The resolution of the Edinburgh Mission conference has undergone reconsiderations based on the Christian needs, cultural divergences and modern perspectives. The core however, which is the gospel remains.

## *What was mission? A brief review of historical perspectives in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon*

The ancestries of mission have always been in The Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 28:16-20). Early missionaries to Cameroon had *Missio Dei* as the compass that guided most of their operations. *Missio Dei* however has taken an interesting perspective in Cameroon today. According to early missionaries like Blumhardt (Blumhardt, 1828) “mission was a knock on Africa’s door”. Josenhans (Josenhans & Josenhans, 1886) on the other hand, understood mission as ‘Industrial’ while Otto Schott (Schott, 1879) sort to maintain *Missio Dei* by making sure industrial mission did not have an economic focus that derailed them.

Missionaries came to see themselves not only as evangelists but as civilizers, so that missionary development and the ideologies of colonial enlargement had common aims and objectives. The team was usually a combination of missionaries and explorers whose focus was minerals. The three ‘Cs’ were in action, Christianizing, Civilizing, and Commercializing. It has been sometimes hard to decipher whether the exchange of gifts that usually took place between the chiefs and the explorers was not the emollient that greased mission work.

The idea of mission to other lands had other ramifications. The idea was to see how a new uncultivated land could be cultivated in a particular way so as to bring out new specie that was void of its past. Names were changed mostly with good intentions to see the new person as in Christ, and culture was progressively eroded. According to B. Fochang, (Fochang, 2014) “... the vessel carrying the message could not be separated from the contents; a confusion that gave birth to paternalism”.

For the sake of this conference on missions, I am focusing here on the Basel missionaries, even though the first missionaries to Cameroon came from the London Baptist Missionary society in 1845 under the leadership of Alfred Saker.

The great commission was very apt when the early missionaries came to Cameroon because they brought the good news to people who had a concept of gods but no concept of Christianity. So like Mbiti (Mbiti, Olupona, & Nyang, 1993) posits, God sent missionaries to Africa, even though popular view holds that missionaries brought God to Africa.

( Rev Val Ogden, 2008) states that *“The evangelical missionary heart is traditionally a full heart and longs to bless others from its richness and its bounty; with words, with theology, with the message of eternal life. Missionary mouths are full of words. Missionary hands are full hands; take our money for your hospital and your school. The missionary traditionally is the primary mover and giver.”*

The problems faced by missionaries at that time included but were not limited to challenging terrain, infrastructure, language, culture, diseases and challenging living conditions. Christian mission is spiced by constraints just like the sender himself, Jesus Christ.

Mission work was not easy. Some of the missionaries could not survive malaria which was very rampant in the area. Some died a few days after arrival, but the rest moved on. Sister Mary Ringli died on her way to teach women on the then Bamendankwe hill, now the station hill on march 7<sup>th</sup>, 1968 eleven years after the church had been granted autonomy. These challenges did not quench the zeal that characterized mission work at the time. The model of suffering plays an important role in Christianity, harnessing moral conduct, spiritual innovation and the ultimate goal. Indeed

an emphasis on suffering permeates the Gospel of Mark which reiterates this through the "Suffering Son of Man" (Mark 8:32), Jesus Christ. Although theologians have suggested that Mark was written to strengthen the persecutions of the early Christian community, the underlying moral is not lost on a modern missionary tackling varied challenges on faith in the face of suffering. These challenges could be likened to the hurdles on the Christian racetrack that strengthened the missionaries and kept them on focus.

The establishment of mission stations which were usually away from the locals was an attempt to create a home away from home. This portrayal of a vertical relationship with the locals was not viewed as an impediment to mission work probably because of the inherent respect that was inculcated in the culture and socialization of the Cameroonian locals. The question however, is to be asked whether such vertical relationships are apt today.

On the other hand, the Cameroonian prospective Christians were eager to grasp this concept and focal point of worship that had just come. It was a time for a shift from the indigenous worship to Christianity. This concept was however misunderstood by the missionaries who thought they were introducing a new perception in Cameroon. The team of Cameroonians that were recruited as aids to the missionaries were relentless in their service and put in their all to make sure the new religion gained new grounds all the time. Modi Din for instance worked tirelessly among his people the Sawa people who located in Douala and its vicinity.

### *What is mission today? Contemporary realities in the PCC*

Some have asked whether mission is still necessary today, when communication has rendered almost all facets of religious eccentrics translucent. This concept calls for further concern and for Christian missionaries and missionary oriented institutions to sit and rethink new strategies for

mission since this easy obtainability of theological knowledge sometimes derails *Missio Dei* to fit certain frames for selective benefits. Now the concept of *Missio Dei* which is mission from a 'Christian center to the "unreached territories," to the ends of the earth' as posited by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME, 2008) of the World Council of Churches calls for contemporarily apt perspectives.

The "unreached territories" now have experts that profess *Missio Dei* as their mode operandi and deploy their utmost according to their perceptions of it. Does this therefore mean that mission is now obsolete? Far from it.

In Cameroon the PCC is now found in all the ten regions of the country. Missionary perspective have progressed both in practice and appellation. The early missionaries soon became fraternal workers, and currently they are referred to as ecumenical coworkers. Does this change of name depict the change in the mode operandi? It is not very clear whether the objectives and focus of mission work have drastically changed. Nonetheless, mission is done more through exchanges rather than a teacher-learner or leader- follower viewpoint.

Masok, upholds that the margins in Cameroon today even in the popular reading context have a lot to offer because their spirituality maintains its original purity free from academic lucidity. (Masok, 2014) . Fochang, George also posits that the growth of Christianity cannot be measured on a straight line. When Christianity expands and make gains at the peripheries, it diminishes at the centre. He quotes Andrew Walls who has emphasized that Africa has become the centre of Christian activity because of the geometric growth of Christianity in the continent (the projections are that by 2040 Africa would be the continent with the highest Christian population). (Fochang, 2014)

Africa as a whole has produced a new kind of Christianity that has embarrassed even the missionaries. The strong belief in demons and mermaids; deliverance ministries and charismatic fanaticism are uniquely African. These tenets are familiar to their culture. These are the new perspectives that the margins now offer. That is why renowned African tele-evangelists are pulling crowds from all continents.

An inclusive mission strategy has fast constituted our core value in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Dennis Kang (Kang, 2014) states that “the south-south cooperation in mission persistently makes mission meaningful from missionary to fraternal workers and now ecumenical co-workers indicate that that mission by us to us is very primordial at our time. So we must be very functional if we must succeed in mission”. It is quite usual nowadays to find south-south relationships in the church, where urban congregations liaise with rural congregations for evangelistic purposes. Another development is partnerships between congregations in Cameroon and those in the West.

This can be exemplified in a biannual intercultural exchange that takes place between the youths of Presbyterian Church Bonamoussadi and the youths of the Evangelical Church of Germany in Munster. These exchanges have produced a positive outlook on Christianity according to the feedback received, and kindled an interest in church issues among young people in both congregations.

### *What will mission be? Future prospects*

It is time to sit and rethink the direction that mission needs to take. Mission is a vital part of the fabric of Christianity, and any Christian organization without mission is void of the core of its own belief.

The early missionaries to Cameroon brought a holistic approach to the care of people. Mission was an inclusion of all facets of *Missio Dei*, so missionaries combined other functions like health and teaching.

The appellation “missionaries” that progressed to fraternal workers has recently been replaced by “ecumenical coworkers” in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Does this shift present pointers about new dimensions mission should take? The CWME poses a vital question; “If there is a shift of the mission concept from “mission to the margins” to “mission from the margins,” what then is the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins?” The new challenge also is not just reframing the concept of mission, but also redefining and viewing of the concept of ‘margins’ through new lenses.

Revisiting the encounter I had with my American Baptist friend, one is tempted to think that mission now has its focus on “fishing from other people’s boats”. I pray this should not be the case. There are so many issues plaguing the society now that need missionary efforts both from North and South, center to margin and vice versa to form a collective think tank for reconciling the world to God and for human salvation.

Ogden (2008) writes;

“To look at God through the lens of mission is to see a God whose very nature and heart is missionary. We see essentially in God a divine self-sending; into creation at the very start of things, through Christ into humanity, and through the Holy Spirit into all ages, places and times. It is a very person centred and Trinitarian sending. And this missionary purpose in sending is to save; to reconcile the world to the divine self, so that all is, ultimately, harmonious and fulfilled. When God sends with these saving purposes, God suffers to achieve them”.

Mission still has a lot of hope in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon because there are still a lot of un-trampled territories. In the spirit of the World Council of Churches, the concept of ‘Justice



and Peace' were the main themes in the Synod meeting of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon in 2013, and the Female Pastor's Conference. This is just one facet in a well of many. The yearning for North-South exchanges is tremendous, especially given the fact that the world is becoming one large family, though with political boundaries. What dimensions should these take? This interest is indicative of a diversity of perspectives that can be converged and harnessed towards one focus –the ultimate *Missio Dei*. It is time to get on deck and search for new perspectives.

According to (Ogden, 2008) it means, that missiological thinking at its best should have a way of taking us back to the very womb and the very heart of things. Viewing others through a genuine missionary perspective gives us the zeal to be one another's keeper.

God's very nature is missionary; sending, suffering, saving –so the big question now in contemporary mission as posited by Ogden is 'who sends to whom and why Where is the sacrificial suffering? Where is the evidence of salvation? Is it not time to galvanize resources so that Christian mission can take a dimension that has a transforming effect on the world at large? How can we as Christians modify worldly secular behavior that is causing the existence of humans on earth an unpredicted nightmare? If mission now has to come from the margin and vice versa, what does the margin bring?

The margins have always provided receptivity or the platform for evangelization as stipulated by Masok, (2014). They read the Bible in a non- academic manner unfortunately we the theological elites are too intelligent not to understand them, so we sometimes call them illiterates of faith. This is not true. These simple people from the margins preach love in deep touching action. That is mission in action

New perspectives of mission especially in institutionalized churches should seriously consider these new "dimensions" in Christianity. The margins are already making tremendous gains at the Centre. If the gains are meaningful; how can what the margins bring be incorporated into current perspectives for mission? The core of many conflicts in the world now is rooted in religious beliefs and doctrines. How can mission help to bring about peace?

Fonki, proposes the adoption of a religious space to solve interfaith issues:

“This is the kind of interreligious space that the Ultimate had established at the beginning of creation when he was busy creating every part of his created order. It is this authentic space that creates space for all classes of people and respects the Earth as God’s created space and all other created beings...Interreligious space will enable all to live in peace, unity and love. The manner, in which God is worshiped and expressed in a creative way within community living, would be a determining factor of religious excellence. The reign of God has space for all. Therefore, interreligious space must create community space that gives the poor, the marginalized and the down trodden the ability to exist. Stability of earth would be guaranteed, if we share our religious spaces in love to one another and with the earth. This interreligious space will enable us to appreciate the worship space of the “Other centeredness” and learn to understand them from their perspective.” (Fonki, 2011)

Reframing our missionary perspectives therefore, will entail a careful study of new spheres that are in the way of our relationship with God. It will also mean a careful evaluation of what we have done so far in missions, our strengths and our constraints. Above all reframing mission will entail looking at both the margins and the center, through the lenses of love as upheld by Christ. I do hope our discussions during this conference and our ensuing implementation of our prospects lead us towards the direction Christ would want us to go. Thank you for your attention.

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