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LUTHERAN IDENTITY IN TANZANIA

By Rev. Dr Ipyana Mwamugobole

In many Lutheran churches in Tanzania, if something is done, one hears people saying: *Stop praying this way, it is not Lutheran. Stop preaching that way, it is not Lutheran. Stop teaching this and that, it is not Lutheran.* If one hears such comments, one can think: he has entered a Luther sacred area and therefore he or she can think he or she must start behaving like other Lutherans worldwide.

When I was leading a seminar with the retired Missionaries who were sent by United Evangelical Mission in Wuppertal Germany to Asia and Africa, I asked them a question to know how did they teach Lutheranism or Lutheran Identity when they were doing missionary work in their respective areas. Nearly all gave the same answer. Their answer affirmed that Lutheran Identity was not a priority but Christianity in general. As a young theologian, who did his PhD in the country of Luther, It was not easy to understand this. I had to have more time with them asking one after the other. Then I came up with two reasons to why Lutheran Identity was not the missionaries' priority:

1. The context itself compelled the missionaries of the time not to stick on the Lutheran identity but Christianity, acceptance of Jesus Christ and the Bible in general instead of teaching the difference between Lutheran church and other denominations (which was like nonexistence, just as new as Lutheran church herself).
2. The package which was called Lutheran Identity was within the package called Christianity. Therefore, whatever was performed, taught, practiced by a missionary, was considered Christianity. For the missionaries to teach people the difference between Lutheran Identity from Christianity, was to complicate the matter

I: Context

When the missionaries arrived in Tanzania:

- They found people believing in many gods, worshiping in their own ways, but ignorant of God of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ himself.

- They found people who used to kill some vulnerable people as thanksgiving to their gods (some parts, not all parts of Tanzania).
- They lived in contexts where some people were buried alive so that they “escort” a deceased chief on his way.
- They found people who used to kill their twins because twins were considered a curse to the family and society (again, not done in all parts of Tanzania).
- They found people with different types of traditional dances some of which lead into killing of a dancing-partner.
- They found people marrying more than one wife (polygamy)

All these religious practises and life style were new to the Missionaries. It was cultural and religious shock. From this situation or context, one can understand why teaching about the Lutheran Identity was not the first priority of the missionaries, but teaching about creation, God being a creator, who loves all people equally, who brought His Word and Jesus to liberate the whole world. They did all these while putting the Word into deeds. Literally the Missionaries started liberating people from some oppressive cultural practices, sending children to schools started by missionaries. Those who were in danger due to their acceptance of Jesus Christ, they were sent to mission stations founded by the missionaries of the time as hiding places. Medical services and teaching on justices or doing advocacy among the people were given priority over Lutheran Identity. When Tanzanians experienced all these done by Missionaries, they thought that is Christianity.

Tanzanians too were confused when they experienced conflicts between missionaries themselves; some saying African culture was heathen while other missionaries affirmed that African culture should not be abolished, it is from God (Bruno Guttmann).

II. Christianity has a Birth Place/ Lutheranism has a Birth Place

Christianity was brought by the Missionaries to Tanzania, and the Lutheran church in Tanzania was born in 1963. Again Christianity and Lutheranism came as a package. When people saw the Missionaries distributing the Bibles again written in vernacular languages, when people heard the missionaries insisting on the importance of reading the Bible, when justification by faith and other teachings were emphasised, when people were taught of two sacraments Baptism and the Holy Communion, the Tanzanian Christians thought that is how

Christianity originally was and therefore should always be. Nobody took trouble of searching and find that such emphasis had to do with Lutheran Identity.

Changes with Time and the Church's Response towards Challenges

With time, the missionaries together with indigenous evangelists and pastors decided to start teaching some basic Lutheran teachings. Augsburg confession, Small and Large Catechisms have been for so long the basic teachings of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Young and old members of the church were taught and are still taught by using this material. This have helped many to understand their church well and they became trainers of new church members. Through these teachings, many could tell the difference between the Lutheran church in Tanzania and other churches or denominations. They felt that they have something which can define who they are. To many, it is no longer 'I am a Christian' but also 'I am a Lutheran.'

Although many consider these teachings to give them identity, still they are comfortable to continue worshiping with people of other denominations, without emphasising much on the differences. They talk much about what unites them than what divides them. As Tanzanians, we sometimes prioritise unity over disunity. This does not mean that there is no conflicts among the people, but our historical background compel us to live that way.

Lutheran Identity and Conflicts within the Church

Where and when do people discuss about Lutheran Identity in Tanzania? Some people like to hear a preacher preaching and teaching about Lutheran identity. Theologians learn in theological colleges too. However, when conflicts within the church occur, people start discussing about Lutheran Identity openly. The same applies to the history of the ELCT. Donald Bloesh comments, "The crucial division in the church today is not sociological or political but theological."¹ If the work is carefully done, that of doing a review on the history of the ELCT, one can discover that, though theological terminologies are missing when people narrate about conflicts, there are discussions pointing to basic theological issues

¹ Donald G. Bloesh, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume One: God, Authority, and Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978)

behind all discussions whenever conflicts occur. In order to understand such discussions, we better go back and review some terms or elements and see how they were discussed in the history of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

I. People's Understanding of Sin and Its Contribution to the Conflicts

Sin is understood differently by different church members in different places in Tanzania. Although people perceive the concept differently, still in nearly all dioceses one finds that sins are graded according to the understanding of the people within the area or within a diocese. Generally, one finds that some of sins are considered bigger or more serious to be committed compared to other sins. Sometimes, it is not about the sin someone committed, but 'who committed that sin' plays a big role in bringing conflicts within the church. This implies that some sins are tolerable by church members, provided they are not committed by a church leader, especially a clergy.

The history of conflicts within the ELCT shows that many church members are not at rest when they discover that some church leaders do not rebuke sins or preach against sin. In such moment, many church members argue that failure to condemn sin is disrespecting the work done by Jesus Christ on the cross. For many, this is like rejecting the truth that the cross is the criterion for salvation. One can argue that it seems church members line with Donald Fraser, the author of *The Future of Africa*, who asserts, "A full understanding of the significance of the Cross of Christ cannot be expected among a people who have little or no sense of sin."² Or Fogliacco N., the author of *The God of All Consolation*, who comments that the time consciousness of sin is no longer within a person, is the time a very person loses direction.³

2. Sin and unworthy Minister or Bishop

Many church members are convinced that Lutheran Identity does not exclude the Ten Commandments and therefore a selection of a bishop, a district pastor, a general secretary of a diocese or of the church officials in general, just to mention but a few, has to consider that a proposed person has to be someone with unquestionable integrity. This is due to their

² Donald Fraser, *The Future of Africa* (London: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1991), 174.

³ Fogliacco N. *The God of All Consolation: A Theology of Salvation and Mission as Divine Comfort* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004), 32

understanding of a minister to be someone who leads the people to prayers and sacrifices to God so as to be in accord with the Scripture which says, “God does not hear a sinner” (John 9:31). This is still compelling many to search for what one can say a “holy or clean person” whom God could hear his or her prayers. One can argue that the understanding of many church members was that of a good minister or bishop of being a person who lives according to God’s commandments.

However, regarding moral failures among their leaders, many church members started questioning themselves; is it possible for unclean pastor to administer Lord Supper and Baptism properly when even the Holy Spirit is not in him or in her any longer? Many could not understand how a minister could give what he himself didn’t have. It was once argued by a certain parish that to demand spiritual care from an immoral pastor was like to milk a bull. This implies that parishners could not see any possibility of spiritual functions being discharged by an immoral pastor, who himself has lost the Holy Spirit. Many were asking themselves if such leaders could really stand firmly and speak like Luther, “My conscience is bound to the Word of God.” Similar to the above, is that the accused leaders were no longer recognized by church members as leaders. Maxwell asserts, “For a leader to have the authority to lead, he needs more than the title on his door. He has to have the trust of those who are following him.”⁴ The conviction of many was that a sinful person was unworthy of leading the church. It is this understanding, which compelled many to start quarrelling with such leaders whom they considered unworthy of leading the church. When church members were asked, “Why are you furious?” Their answer was simple: “We want to reform the church. We are reformers.”

3. People’s Understanding of Good Works and the Witness of the Church

Within the ELCT, one finds groups with different understandings of the role of good works, especially when they think of daily life of an already saved Christian. Some church members were unpleasant with what they considered to be their leaders’ misuse of Luther’s teaching of justification by faith alone. Many held that some of their leaders were neglecting the role of good works or the Ten Commandments. Good works, according to many church members, ought not to be less emphasized, for to do so was like to open the door for many to fail morally. However, such kind of discussion or argument contributed to the conflicts, for some

⁴John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leadership Within You*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 39.

church officials considered the argument above to be in favour of self-justification, which was contrary to what ought to be a teaching of the Lutheran church. The argument of this group seemed to base on Luther's teaching which says, "For if we could buy our own powers keep the Ten Commandments as they are to be kept, we would need nothing further, neither the creed nor the Lord's Prayer."⁵ However, a theological discussion as such caused heat as when both sides seemed to have the same idea or understanding but different terminologies and different interpretation.

Many church members together with some church officials were very sensitive to the witness of the church. They believed that the witness of the church has something to do with the witness in the life of clergy and laypeople. This is what compelled some church members to challenge their leadership while emphasizing the importance of good works for the witness of the church.

4. Laypeople and the Ordained Ministry or Ordained Minister

Among the visible battle one experienced in the history of the ELCT, was that based on what was the role of the ordained ministers and that of laypeople and their boundaries. The ordained ministers accused the laypeople of either crossing the boundaries as when some were also accused of excommunicating pastors or doing everything possible to make sure that a certain ordained minister; being a pastor or a bishop, is excommunicated. It was said that after their goal was reached, such laypeople celebrated and consider a victory on their side and they called themselves-Reformers. Some bishops insisted that a church was called upon together with all church workers to serve and that the ordained ministry was the foundation of the being of the church in the world. They referred to the Scripture which says, "take care of my flock" (Jn. 21:15-17) to mean a pastoral obligation not given to laypeople. They insisted that people who were supposed to do that work were the ordained ministers and not otherwise. It was from the above act, bishops raised questions like; who has given laypeople the mandate to perform duties of a pastor? Do they really understand the meaning of gracious God through ordination of a pastor through lying on of hands of bishops and other pastors?

⁵Martin, Luther, *Large Catechism, Second Part: The Creed.*, translated by F.Bente and W.H.T.Dau, April 1999, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/Lrgct10.txt> (19.06.2009). Cf: Kenneth Wagner / Robert C. Baker (eds.), *The Augsburg Confession and Its Apology*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 43-44.

On the other side, laypeople, especially those who were holding some positions within the church, accused the ordained ministers of exercising power contrary to their call. Some laypeople were uncomfortable with such big authority the ordained ministers claimed to have, including the bishops.

5. Table Communion or Celebration of the Lord Supper with Bitterness

Lord Supper, as the Lutherans in Tanzania were taught, is a celebration in which no one is advised to partake if one is not in peace with a neighbour, a friend or with God. In short, the act of coming together as a family when celebrating the Lord Supper discourages anyone who is not in good relationship with a neighbour.⁶ It was argued that if one partakes while in such situation, one was deceiving oneself and therefore deserves judgement. The main reference always given was that from 1Cor. 27-29. The words, “Let a man examine himself...” have been often uttered with special emphasis during the Lord Supper. The teaching became special as a result church members were taught in confirmation classes and it was included in religious education in schools. Although, the understanding of Luther was that which pointed the above argument to mean those people who could not differentiate between the normal bread and that partaken during the Lord Supper to start seeing the importance of the Lord Supper before partaking,⁷ church members within the ELCT understood differently. Many church members held that the text above calls an individual to challenge oneself before one partakes the Lord Supper to see if the total meaning of Christian life was evident in one’s life, including relationships. Also, many understood the above to mean church members were to challenge one another to prove the same.

With regards to examination of relationships before partaking of the Lord Supper, the teaching was deeply understood and well-practiced by many, for it relates to African understanding of communal life. In many African societies, eating and drinking together have

⁶Joseph, Healey / Donald, Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996), 317. Cf: *John Mutiso-Mbinda, “The Eucharist and the Family in An African Setting”* AMECEA Documentation Service, 282 (April 4, 1984): 1-5. 3. Cf: Brian, Hearne, *Struggling for a New World*, (Eldorate: AMECEA Gaba Publications Spearhead 129, 1993), 72-73.

⁷ Martin, Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works*, project Gutenberg January 1996,

a great meaning, and this is done among people who were in conflict and therefore eating and drinking together act as a symbol for reconciliation.⁸

Due to the above teaching, many church members could not permit themselves to receive the Lord Supper during the time of conflicts for many were convinced that conflicts put their relationships in bad order. This was to avoid what they believed to be a judgement to follow. Again, the fact that pastors were also obliged to make sure that the discipline of the Lord Supper was maintained by examining the life of his or her congregants;⁵⁴⁰ many were troubled. It was evident that some among the already mentioned church members could not understand how could, according to them; an immoral pastor maintains a discipline of the Lord Supper. On the other side, many church members were convinced that ministers who ought to distribute the Lord Supper to them were to be not among those who had moral failures and not reconciled. In some parishes, however, when the Lord Supper was distributed, some church members walked out. In some parishes, the Lord Supper was distributed, but a pastor jumped over those whom he had quarreled with. As a result, tension increased which later resulted into big conflicts.

6. Repentance and the Understanding of Justification by Faith

From the above mentioned failures of church officials, especially moral failures, church members expected that the people involved in moral failures could repent. This is due to what many believed that repentance could have acted as one of the main ways of putting things in good order, not only between church officials and church members but also between man and God. Many church members considered church officials as God's messengers who were supposed to live according to the Scripture. It is from the Scriptures one expects that moral failures are to be confessed widely. It was a conviction of many that the Scripture could have enabled church officials to challenge themselves and rectify their ways through repentance. It was from the above "evils" many church members started to get confused after they discovered that people, especially church officials involved in such acts, had no conscience, which could have called them back and led them to repentance. The understanding of many was not different from other people like Alfred Poirier who believes that "repentance is a

⁸ Healey / Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 317. Cf: Mutiso-Mbinda, *The Eucharist and the Family*, 72-73

fruit of fearing God.”⁹ That many were disinterested with repentance raised many questions. Many started questioning themselves if believing in justification by faith was that affecting their leaders to the extent of thinking that in whatever they were doing they ought not to bother themselves, for the grace of God was sufficient! This confused many because they couldn’t see any kind of moral reform through repentance while knowing exactly that it is through repentance a sinner is not punished. From the above, many thought that the church was not playing her role of being the light and the salt of the world.

7. The Supremacy of the Scripture

If one asks a church member from the above two dioceses to why did they fought or what was at the centre of the conflicts, he or she will be answered that the authority of the Scripture is what was at the centre. Many church members were very much convinced that they were obliged to restore the authority of the Word of God together with God’s commandments. Many church members believed that what their leaders were doing was not only a sign of disobedient of the constitution but also lowering or disvaluing the authority of the scripture. It was once argued, “Our leaders have left the Scripture behind and now are living worldly life.” Therefore, some church members together with some church leaders found themselves obliged to fight for the restoration of the authority of the Scripture. The tendency of including many quotations from the bible whenever discussing contradicting matters within the church proves this.

If one reviews all what could have been mentioned to be theological discussions during the conflicts, including the concept of sin or sinners, the role of good works, the witness of the church, priesthood of all believers, just to mention but a few, one discovers that such discussions were suggesting on the importance of the use of Scriptures as a majoring stick of all what were considered to be the teachings and the life of the church and Christians in general. Church members and church officials entered into conflicts due to differences caused by different understandings of the Scriptures on the same matter and on how to resolve the contradicting situations.

⁹ Alfred, Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006), 115.

However, the Scripture was not denied by any side, but the interpretation of the Scripture was a challenge to the church and church members in general. Each group demanded to have a right interpretation of the Scripture. From the above, one can argue that it was the case to find one group insisting on the unity of the church by accusing those who wanted to separate themselves from arch diocese as rebels. Obedience was always emphasised by this group while accusing the other group of not being obedient. The argument was always based on Heb. 13:17, the text which calls people to obey their rulers. This was used as a hammer. However, the accused groups also affirmed that being in unity or being obedient did not mean to obey and respect even corrupt leadership but to urge such leadership to stop from immoral acts.⁵⁵⁰ Again, the argument from such groups based on 1Cor.5:11, which urges people to stop relating with idolater, drunkard and people of such habits. For by associating with such people, according to their understanding, could meant to go against 1Cor.5:6, which tells about the danger of “a little leaven to leavens the whole lump.” It is from this experience one can understand that even a call to go back to the Scripture was not without causing misunderstandings. It is from the above misunderstandings conflicts prevailed.

8. Priesthood of All Believers

From this teaching, many understood that every member within the church was not there accidentally but called and commissioned by God to work for him. Many believed that the church could have been left to the hands of church leaders, especially the ordained to lead, provided they had good moral. One can consider the argument to relate with what was known to be a stance of Martin Luther. One finds that although Luther was against disorders within the church, as to argue against those who thought every Christian could perform a role of a pastor or a priest, still it was said that Luther put clearly, that any baptised church member can take over church’s responsibilities when those who were supposed to do so failed morally.¹⁰ The fact that some church leaders were considered by church members to be immoral, many laypeople were compelled to consider themselves obliged to participate fully in preaching and in putting things in good order. One can be compelled to argue that the act of removing some pastors from parishes and that of laypeople conducting Sunday services

Hans, Schwarz, *The Christian Church: Biblical Origin, Historical Transformation and Potential for the Future*, 185.

¹⁰ Hans, Schwarz, *The Christian Church: Biblical Origin, Historical Transformation and Potential for the Future*, 185.

outside their church buildings whenever they were forced to accept a pastor whom they don't want, was affirming the argument above. In other words, this was an effort of Laypeople of affirming that they were also able to take over the responsibilities of the ordained ministers when situations call them to do so. They were compelled to believe that the church did not belong to ordained ministers alone but to people of God, who fear and respect the word of God regardless they are ordained or not.

The only solution to the problem of exclusion, according to them, was for the laypeople to struggle for what they considered their right to serve God their Lord. They argued that they were thankful to God that after a long time of silence, especially on the side of church officials in speaking and preaching against sins, God had empowered them (laypeople) to speak against evils and therefore work for Him.⁵⁵³ As many perceive, such understanding is what compelled laypeople to call their group a 'Reformation Group' or a 'Reformation Committee' to affirm that they were reforming the church by affirming the teaching of the priesthood of all believers.

Challenges and Opportunities

Church members are not very much interested with the Lutheran Identity; they believe that insisting on the Lutheran Identity can lead into division of the church and division among Christians. They love to hear about the unity of the church, the church as the body of Christ with different parts etc. This attitude compel many Lutheran to overlook some basic teachings of and therefore some are easily taken away by any new movement which comes to their side.

There are few theologians and Christians who devote their time and energy to teach other people the basic teachings of the Lutheran Church.

There is always a danger of excluding all what was not taught, practised or spoken by the missionaries and consider them "not Lutheran identity." As a result Lutherans are sometimes accusing and sometimes fighting one another because of such small differences like some would like to see others praying like them, singing like them and worshipping like them. If it happens that some are worshipping while lifting their hands on the sky, or crying while praying, conflicts happen, for such gestures are considered to be against the Lutheran Identity.

Lutheran Identity in the Tanzanian Soil

When I went to Tanzania for a holiday, I took some flowers with me and planted in my garden. The flowers came up, but not as how they are in Germany. Christianity, as I have already mentioned earlier, originated somewhere and it was brought to Tanzania and planted there in a Tanzanian soil. Lutheranism was brought to Tanzania and put into Tanzanian soil. For sure this kind of Christianity and this kind of Lutheranism did not germinate like how it was in the country of origin. This is due to the fact that Christianity as well as Lutheranism are always trying to bring the light of the Word of God while responding to challenges facing people of a particular place. We Tanzanians remember the missionaries not because of their clothes or colour, but because of how they positively responded towards challenges faced by the Tanzanians of the time. And so long many of what they planted and implemented there are still of great benefit, Christianity and Lutheranism continues to grow. The ELCT started in 1963 with only 400,000 people is now having 6 million active church members.

Conclusion

The fact that Christianity came together with Lutheranism confused people or made it difficult for people to differentiate between Lutheran Identity from Christianity in general. To many, all what was performed by the missionaries was Christianity. However, with time, identity became necessary so that one could distinguish him or herself from other members of other churches. Again, the coming of other denominations caused a spread of many different teachings. This awakened the Lutheran church and therefore the church considered it necessary to become not only a preaching but also a teaching church where people can learn about their church's identity. This was followed by the introduction of Augsburg Confession, small and large catechisms for confirmation classes.

Christianity as well as Lutheran Identity have a lot to do with context and culture. This implies that though there is Lutheran Theology which can lead into identifying the Lutheran identity, still even the interpretation of such theology depends on the context and the culture of a place. For example, challenges facing the church in Tanzania and the way to positively respond to them, differ from challenges facing people in Germany and the way to respond

toward them. Therefore, even theology applicable to the situation mentioned in the context Tanzania differ.

The church has a long way to go; to teach and share or distribute the material which can help or enable people to understand Lutheran Teachings and theology which is important in the search for the Lutheran identity. It takes time till a person accept teachings which are contrary to one's culture, for example it takes time for a Lutheran Christian in Tanzania to agree that the holiness of the Holy Communion has nothing to do with the holiness of the minister who is ministering it. However, understanding Lutheran identity does not mean separating oneself from ecumenism, but understanding one's denomination or church and be ready to share with others that understanding.