

## **SPECIAL REPORT**

### **LUTHERAN IDENTITY IN AFRICA AND MELANESIA**

#### **Some Ecumenical Reflections\***

From October 25 to November 28, 1982, a Study Seminar for Lutheran Pastors from Tanzania and Papua New Guinea was held at Martin Luther Seminary, Lae. Together with Dr Sutan Hutagalung of Indonesia, I was responsible for planning and directing the seminar. The organiser, the Institute for the Study of World Mission in Bavaria, thought that such a seminar might be helpful in bringing Lutheran theologians from these two indigenous churches together.

In view of the many different confessions and denominations springing up everywhere, many Lutherans are beginning to question the legitimacy of confessional divisions, especially in countries of the third world.

Accordingly, the Lutheran Churches want to clarify why they are Lutheran. Is there any necessity for the churches of those countries to be confessional? If so, what is the specific confessional identity of Anglicans, Catholics, or others?

Already in 1979, we had invited a group of Papua New Guinean and Tanzanian pastors to come together in Germany. Part of our purpose was to give them an opportunity to look at where the Lutheran church had originated. Their suggestion at the end of their stay was that the seminar in Germany was all well and good, but that it was not their context of theologising. A seminar in Germany was very interesting, because it gives an insight into the history of a confession, and into the development of churches in Europe, but many felt distinctly that the context of their own country was necessary in order to develop their own theology further.

The Institute for the Study of World Mission had therefore planned the next seminar in Papua New Guinea. There, so many missions, churches, and renewal movements, are competing – many claiming

exclusively to have the truth. The seminar, therefore, wanted to investigate the interrelatedness of biblical truth and confessional identity. Can the confessional doctrines become meaningful, by providing answers to the social, cultural, and religious challenges of the present time? If Lutheranism has anything to say today to the issues of our time, it just cannot be based only on its historical significance.

If it were only historical, then it would ultimately be an obsolete movement of the past. At some time in the future, the theologians of the third-world countries will have to come to terms with this question. Is Lutheranism – or, for that matter, Anglicanism, Catholicism, or any other confessional form of church – just a part of history, developed in diverse circumstances about four hundred years ago, or are they still relevant today in our societies? Do the past confessional doctrines reflect valid biblical norms for today? This issue is raised among many younger theologians. There is no easy answer. This became quite evident during the discussions of the seminar, and for this reason, I called the report on the seminar: “Struggling for Lutheran Identity: The Relevance of Lutheran Theology in an Afro-Melanesian Context”. A theological struggle is necessary. Even we Europeans cannot simply be satisfied to be separated by confessions, without struggling for an identity in each new generation.

The first part of our seminar at Lae was an orientation. During this period, we asked each group to introduce their respective church. So, the Papua New Guineans spoke about their church, their views of culture, their pastoral problems, how they have organised themselves administratively, educationally, spiritually, and liturgically. Later the Tanzanians responded.

At the end of this first part, we asked each Papua New Guinean pastor to accompany an African pastor to his village or home area. In this way, the Africans were not only confined to theological discussions, or to an experience of the church on the academic level in the seminary, but they were also able to experience church in the villages at the grass-roots. Here they were accepted as guests. They were exposed to how the people live in villages: what they eat, and what their spiritual life in the congregations is like. Such an exposure within a church is necessary in order to get to know another church.

The next part of the seminar was devoted to the experiences gained in the congregations. The discussions centred round the pastoral and social issues, which the participants had come across. Where are the areas of confrontation in each society? It was strongly felt that the churches need to be challenged to speak out more pronouncedly on social and political issues, such as law and order, education, marriage, and unemployment. Some of the pastoral issues which needed to be addressed related to the churches' struggle with traditional views, for instance, ancestors, death, and healing.

In the fourth part of the seminar, we used a booklet called *Lutheran Identity*, published by the Lutheran World Federation's Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France. Access to Luther's works is very difficult, as there are so many books written by him and about him and his theology. So, the Ecumenical Institute of Strasbourg condensed the basics of Lutheran doctrines into ten convictions. We took this as a working basis. Furthermore we thought it was not right to talk about the Reformation and Luther without reading texts of Luther himself. So, each day, we related one particular conviction to selected portions of a text from Luther. In this way, we were able to read passages of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, the *Lectures on Galatians* and *The Freedom of a Christian*. Although these texts sometimes revealed the disparity between Medieval, Reformation thinking and our thinking today, they are a first-hand and valuable insight into the theological thoughts of Luther. In the following discussions, the participants were challenged to relate these theological thoughts to their own situation. To do this, we formed groups, asking each group to give a short report on the discussions. These were then compiled in the final report.

The first Lutheran conviction, as it is formulated in the booklet *Lutheran Identity*, states the following thesis: God's loving condescension is the only way to salvation. God comes down to humankind, to men and women, for their salvation. This stresses that God takes the entire initiative in the saving encounter between God and human beings. The result of the group discussions did not pretend to give final solutions or final answers. Instead, the pastors were encouraged to speak out and voice their theological difficulties. The reports make evident that traditional religions,

both in Tanzania and Melanesia, have a strong anthropocentric approach to salvation, with the human beings initiating action towards gods, or spirits, or ancestors. This is very different from what Luther stresses and sees as the core of the gospel.

Another aspect of the discussion showed that salvation in traditional religion is regarded mainly in a very holistic sense as wellbeing, which expresses itself in blessing, health, offspring, or success. All this is an integral part of an experience of salvation for Christians in Melanesia and Tanzania. The idea of Christians suffering in this world, therefore, is seen as abnormal and in opposition to traditional views, which regard wellbeing as an expression of a faithful relationship to God. Hence, for both Tanzanians and Papua New Guineans, the concept of a suffering Christ, as Luther developed it in his *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross), is very strange, because a suffering person in society is not a successful person, not a blessed person. This was just one of the queries voiced during the discussion.

In the discussion on salvation, the unity and harmony of the living and the dead ancestors was also stressed. This is a very important element of salvation, as it is understood by Melanesians and Tanzanians. For an African, for instance, it is most important that every dying person be reconciled with the ancestors. If such a person is in disharmony with the ancestors, he or she will not be taken up into the community of the dead. This is the worst thing that can happen for an African; to die without being reconciled to the ancestors, and not to know if one will enter the community of the ancestors, is seen as the ultimate damnation.

According to the booklet, *Lutheran Identity*, the second basic conviction of Lutheran identity is witnessing to God's justifying action in Jesus Christ as the essence of the message of salvation, as the criterion of the church's proclamation, and as the foundation of Christian ethics. In the discussions, many Tanzanians thought that justification, as understood by the Reformers was very individualistic, an event between God and an individual who is saved. This message of justification, they thought, could be enriched by the Melanesian and the African experience. Justification *coram deo* (before God) should not only be viewed individualistically, but

it must also take the whole community into account, of which the individual is a part.

This is related to the fact that communal harmony and communally-oriented ethics is the only possible way for an individual to understand his or her life. Only within this context, is justification thinkable. This seems a legitimate challenge for Reformation theology, one that might enrich Lutheran identity, as experienced now in European theology.

Another traditional Lutheran conviction stresses the priesthood of all believers, indicating the equality of all Christians before God, and the apostolic obligation of the whole Christian community. Discussing this conviction, the Tanzanian and Melanesian pastors felt that, in their traditions, the concept of mediation is very important. Priesthood, in their culture, is a divine office; there the priestly lineages have the knowledge to ensure salvation. The priest is therefore a mediator, and functions as an intercessor on behalf of his people. In the traditional Lutheran view, this is not the case, because all those reconciled in Christ have equal access to God. Such discussions reveal a disparity between a conviction, which originated 450 years ago, and was thought to have a firm biblical basis, and what the cultures affirm now as their experience.

These issues were, of course, not solved, but they were at least voiced, discussed, and referred to the biblical message, which was one of the main objects of the seminar, thereby initiating a process of theological thinking, and indicating further areas of theological discussions.

Reviewing the weeks together, I think the seminar has definitely been worthwhile. The advantage of having a seminar like this, oriented according to traditional dogmatic convictions, is that it initiates a dialogue with the traditional theologies of the European churches. This is a necessary step for the sake of the universality of the church; at the same time, it is the only way to come to terms with the traditional concepts still powerful among Christians in Africa and Melanesia. Could such a seminar also be a model, not only within the Lutheran Church, but also between other churches? Yes, I think it is very important for the churches of Papua New Guinea to get together to clarify and explain their theological

positions; to experience what are the specific gifts and contributions of each church. Such a theological reflection is needed in view of the many divisions and split-offs among Christians. Looking at the recent issues of *Point* (Nos. 2-4), this trend can definitely be confirmed. Today, we are experiencing a resurgence of renewal movements, emerging as independent churches in some areas. This suggests that our churches must make more endeavours to search for the truth of the gospel as it relates to the ecumenical, cultural, and spiritual experience of people, because they are searching for a message that is meaningful to their lives.

I also say this, in view of what we have discussed at this meeting about discernment. Developing a spirit of discernment in Papua New Guinea is vital today, and we need to train this gift in the seminaries and among the pastors. This spirit, however, needs a firm basis of theological convictions, and a confidence in one's own confessional identity. Only then, can it be effective when challenged or confronted. This might also encourage a direct sympathetic dialogue with the leaders of the renewal movements, instead of excommunicating them. Both sides need to be exposed to such encounters, for theological and spiritual reasons.

One further important insight gained during the seminar was that such a meeting opens one's eyes for the gifts which have developed in one's own church, for instance, in liturgy, or in the ministry. On the other hand, meeting different churches or confessions makes one realise what is underdeveloped in one's own church, where gifts are not used. I myself am convinced that for our own development within the Lutheran Church we need the spiritual and theological fellowship of other theologians, be they Catholic, Anglican, United, or Baptist. For instance, in Germany, the Lutheran Church has come to a new awareness and appreciation of Holy Communion, due to the challenge from the Catholic Church. So, today, in many German Lutheran churches, you can find a renewed revival of the eucharist. This is definitely an outcome of greater fellowship between the churches.

For this reason, I think that the theological journal in Papua New Guinea proposed by MATS will be a good forum for theological dialogue.

I would only encourage you to think further along these lines, because the different churches really do need each other.

A further insight of the participants of the seminar was their discovery that Lutheran identity in Papua New Guinea is not the same as in Tanzania. Everybody realised that identity is made up of various aspects. One of these is, of course, the doctrinal heritage introduced by the missionaries. Now, the Lutherans in Papua New Guinea and Tanzania are in the process of relating these doctrines to their specific situations, their culture, their language, and their worldview. This is no small task.

A second aspect, which defines and develops a specific identity, is the historical development of a church. This came out quite clearly when discussing how the different colonial administrations, the different cultural influences, and the different missionary backgrounds had interacted with the spiritual and congregational growth of the churches.

The third factor, which was felt as being very decisive for an identity, is the social and the political context. The Tanzanians have a very different social and political situation. The tribes are very much bigger, and the political influence of the other African nations surrounding Tanzania definitely also affects the theological understanding of the gospel, and the emerging spirituality.

In concluding this report, let me say that I think this kind of seminar can definitely serve as a model for future discussions among churches. To be sure, the structure and the length of the seminar do not permit theological conclusions in depth. Rather, they will often turn out to be preliminary and superficial. Such discussions do, however, induce theological reflections, by relating a specific doctrinal heritage to a particular cultural and historical situation. Ultimately, Lutheran theology will have to stand the test of such an encounter if it is to be of relevance to people of our time.

– **Gernot Fugmann**

**NOTE**

- \* The more detailed report of the Study Seminar mentioned in the text appeared in condensed form in “Struggling for Lutheran Identity”, in *Catalyst* 13-4 (1983), pp. 312-327. The above text is a modified transcription of the theological reflections on the seminar, which Revd Gernot Fugmann contributed to the MATS Study Institute (1984), from a tape kindly supplied by Kristen Redio, Lae.