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Integral mission in Bonhoeffer: framework for understanding the mission of Evangelical Association of Malawi

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The paper explores how Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and writings embody the principle of integral mission. It then endeavours to understand the mission of Evangelical Association of Malawi as integral within the framework of Bonhoeffer's theology. Evangelical Association of Malawi is an umbrella body of evangelical Churches and organizations in the country. The Association embodies the concepts of religionless Christianity and mature worldliness as well as that of salvation as wholeness. With that understanding, the mission of the Church is not limited to proclamation of the Gospel for salvation of the soul but rather extends to matters of socio-economic and political justice. The Association is credited with equipping the Church for evangelism and Church planting as well as with advocating and fighting for justice in the socio-political sphere. The paper explores integral mission in the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, critically highlights recent interventions of Evangelical Association of Malawi understood within the framework of Bonhoeffer's theology, and then discusses lessons from the Association regarding the essence and practice of integral mission with the assumption that the lessons could be replicated in other contexts.

Integral mission in Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The prime definition of mission is constituted in the Latin term, *Missio Dei*. God is the God of mission and His mission is integral. Fergus King argues that God seeks us with two aims, first of salvation, the freeing of people from their sins and their restoration to a right relationship with Him; and second of liberation, the work of breaking the power of sin in earthly structures and relationships.¹ He goes on to distinguish between the missionary dimension (nature) and missionary intention (tasks) of the Church. It could be argued that proper understanding of the missionary dimension is vital for the Church to carry out missionary intention in its wholeness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer demonstrates that adequate understanding.

As is well known, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of the German Republic on 30 January 1933. Hitler's philosophy was that of the nazification of the Church and elimination of the Jewish race. There was much oppression and mass killings during the Nazi regime. Hitler felt the German nation was a superior race and he led the nation to deal harshly with what he felt were inferior races. Unfortunately, some sections of the Church sided with the oppressors. Karl Barth (Swiss) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German) struggled against the evils of the Nazi regime. Just as Adolf Hitler came to power, Barth knew that he had to resist National Socialism, but realised that the German Church was not prepared to resist because of the long-standing alliance between the altar and the throne.²

Bonhoeffer challenged the 'orders of creation' theology, which the nationalists used to link Nazism with God's will. In 1933, the Evangelical Church of the German Nation wrote:

We see in race, volk and nation, orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by God. God's law for us is that we look to the preservation of these orders ... In the mission to the Jews we perceive a grave danger to our nation. It is the entrance gate for alien blood into our body politic ... In particular, marriage between Germans and Jews is to be forbidden.³

The statement from the Evangelical Church could be understood as dehumanising against the Jews and could have condoned Hitler's anti-Semitic views. Bonhoeffer decried the anti-Jewish and anti-non-Aryan campaign as against God's will, as well as the Church's silence in light of the evils of Nazism. Bonhoeffer's theology was Christocentric, as he asked: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" He explored the theological place of Christ incarnate in the Church and what that means to the state of being human and being in relation with other humans. He said the I-You relationship (intersubjectivity) should not be conceived as a subject-object relationship, but rather as a dialogical relationship invoking serious ethical decisions. He said one's real relationship with another person is a relationship mediated by God, and that relationship forms the basis of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology.⁴ The implication is that the essential nature of humanity is not contingent upon historical circumstances but upon the fact of being created in the image and likeness of God. He said that the Church is the Christ of the present. This understanding can help in alleviating dehumanization. It could be observed that the Church in Germany missed that understanding and that the Nazi regime

misunderstood the I-You relationship in terms of the Kantian transcendental philosophy in which the 'You' was the object.

Haynes and Hale remark that the whole life and theology of Bonhoeffer are summed up in understanding of discipleship as following Christ.⁵ They say discipleship cannot be understood without taking Bonhoeffer's key theological concepts: Christ existing as community, costly grace, vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*), ethics as formation, and religionless Christianity. By not fighting against the evils of the Nazi regime, the Church in Germany failed the test of discipleship. They did not portray what it means to follow after Christ; a call to discipleship entails speaking and acting against dehumanization. A disciple of Christ identifies with the sufferers, speaks and acts on their behalf, and in so doing portrays who Jesus Christ is for us today. Jesus suffered and died vicariously for humanity. Bonhoeffer remarked: "One only learns to have faith by living in full this-worldliness of life ... And I think this is faith; this is metanoia. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian."⁶ Clifford Green contends under Bonhoeffer's influence that community with God is simultaneously community of co-humanity.⁷ In that sense, the Church which is both divine and human reality should not withdraw from life in the created world. Bonhoeffer asked:

What does a Church, a congregation, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life, mean in a religious world? How do we talk about God – without religion, that is, without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, the inner life, and so on? How do we speak in a worldly way about God? How do we go about being religionless-worldly Christians ... In a religionless situation, what do ritual and prayer mean? Is this where the arcane discipline or the difference between the penultimate and the ultimate have new significance?⁸

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer says that the Church is Church only when it is there for others, and that the Church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community—not dominating but helping and serving. The Church will have to confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy and illusionism as the roots of all evil.⁹ The Church should be there for others and not embrace religiousness at the expense of the suffering brothers and sisters. Bonhoeffer realised, as did Barth, the failure of liberal theology to deal with the secularised world and the need to bring in the living Christ. He also realised the failure of 'religious Christianity' and called instead for religionless Christianity. Bonhoeffer writing to Eberhard

Bethge says, “I hope you don’t think I will emerge from here a man of the inner line”¹⁰ and further says, “Don’t be alarmed! I will definitely not come out of here as a *homo religiosus*”¹¹ and Bonhoeffer further contends that a Christian is not a *homo religiosus*.¹² *Homo religiosus* would mean flight from this-worldly reality. Such religiousness concentrates exclusively on building one’s or the Church’s own spiritual life without being there for others. It stands in contradiction to the principle of integral mission and should be countered with Bonhoeffer’s religionless, this-worldly, but Christ-centred spirituality.

Bonhoeffer argues that Christ entered history and the Church is therefore His presence in history.¹³ He further says that the history of the Church is the hidden centre of world history and that the Church is Christ existing as community. With that understanding, it is legitimate for the Church to engage the socio-economic and political realities of the world. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer argues that in Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered the reality of the world and that in Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time.¹⁴ By the incarnation, Christians are called upon to participate in social realities and not to retreat from real life. Bonhoeffer critiques the division of reality into sacred and profane or Christian and worldly as shown by the monk and cultural Protestant of the nineteenth century arguing that there is only one realm of Christ-reality in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united.

This is holistic understanding of the Church’s mission. Drawing from Bonhoeffer, one could argue that Christian life is participation in both the ultimate realm of faith and grace and the penultimate realm of existential realities of day to day life. The mission of the Church ceases to be integral when one dimension is ignored. Integral mission entails confronting the powers that threaten fullness of life in the here and now. Destruction of the natural means the destruction of life. Social and political ills are unnatural and destroy life. The Church should engage the temporal dimension and help entrench life-enhancing systems and practices. That is integral mission. Christ is the centre and power of the Bible, of the Church, of theology, but also of humanity, reason, justice and culture.¹⁵ The Church’s social engagement should be centred on Christ for He is the foundation of reality.

Zimmermann and Gregor argue that Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism manages to uphold the divine and the human as well as the transcendent and the immanent.¹⁶ Such humanism addresses well the issues of human dignity by virtue of its acknowledgement of the transcendence as a reference point. Frick quotes Bonhoeffer saying, “the destruction of humanness—*Menschsein*—is sin.”¹⁷ In that, Bonhoeffer viewed the violation of human worth and dignity as sin before God, who is the transcendent point of reference. Our experience is that injustice and poverty destroy humanness. They are a result and manifestation of the social dimension of sin. The Church should not omit the social dimension of her mission.

Bonhoeffer was misunderstood and misinterpreted by some people. His concepts of worldly Christianity, mature worldliness, religionless Christianity, not *homo religiosus*, non-religious relationship between God and man, before God and with God we live without God, *deus ex machina* and *etsi deus non daretur* made some think that Bonhoeffer was against belief in God. Even the secularization theorists and death-of-God theologians of the 1960s thought that Bonhoeffer was one of them. Those concepts should be understood within the broader context of Bonhoeffer's Christocentric theology. They reflect the principle of integral mission. We note that Bonhoeffer was concerned with living out the practical implications of being Christ's disciples not just holding on to dogma without living vicariously. Christ Himself did live and die vicariously.

Bonhoeffer's question remains ever-relevant: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? We should explore the missional dimension of that question. It calls for a paradigm shift where the Church has been ‘religious’ and given tacit approval to dehumanization; and where the Church has worshipped the *deus ex machina* or political ideologies. The Church is called to the theological centre of her mission. Christ’s mission is integral and any mission that adequately embraces its Christological dimension should be integral. Integral mission portrays who Jesus Christ is for us today.

Bonhoeffer maintains that God is holy both in His perfect separation from the sinful world and in the establishment of His sanctuary in the midst of the world.¹⁸ The Christian community is in the world but not of the world. The Church, as the *ecclesia Christi*, should participate in existential realities in the world while maintaining its holiness and without becoming tainted by things profane. Robert Vosloo argues that such is a participation in the

reality of God and the reality of the world.¹⁹ The teaching counters what can be called ‘hyper-spirituality’ whereby participation in the reality of the world is regarded as sinful. Bonhoeffer’s point is that costly grace entails involvement in existential realities of the world. He calls for obedient and responsible action in faith and an exclusive allegiance to God.

Bonhoeffer’s thinking is similar to Gerrit Brand’s idea of salvation as wholeness. In his book, *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost*, Brand follows the nineteenth century poet Jonas Ntsiko who referred to the salvation proclaimed by the Christian missionaries as a fabulous ghost: something that many have spoken or heard of, but that no-one has yet seen or encountered.²⁰ Brand says that African literature on salvation has engaged an ideology critique, or hermeneutic of suspicion, leading to deconstruction of traditional Western soteriologies. African soteriology should adequately address contextual challenges like military coups, refugee crises and poverty. The idea of salvation as wholeness is akin to that of integral mission. Both spiritual and social dimensions are considered in the Church’s endeavours. In the same vein, the South African Lutheran theologian Manas Buthelezi uses the word salvation to refer to the ‘wholeness of life’ as God’s goal for creation.²¹ Buthelezi says religion and life belong together and far from being a department of life, religion is life.²² Life is interpreted with religious eyes. In participating in life one apprehends God’s presence and so we can speak of the sacramental character of life.²³ The principle of sacramentality of life calls for integral mission. Speaking of salvation as wholeness is not support for secular soteriologies nor identifying the Christian Gospel with social amelioration, but rather an emphasis that the Church’s mission should touch both spiritual and social dimensions of human existence.

The Evangelical Association of Malawi

Evangelical Association of Malawi is an umbrella Christian mother body for evangelical Churches and Christian organisations that seeks to mobilise, unite and equip Churches for holistic proclamation of the love of God in Christ through word and deed.²⁴ The Association exists to enhance the capacities of evangelical Churches and organizations to mobilise and empower their congregations for effective and efficient integral mission in Malawi.

Three of EAM's strategic objectives are promotion of integral mission in evangelical Churches of Malawi; resource mobilization for spiritual and social ministries; and promotion of programmes and organizations committed to holistic proclamation of the Gospel. The strategic objectives show that EAM is concerned with both the spiritual and social welfare of the nation.

The Evangelical Association of Malawi advocacy strategy for 2011 to 2015 provides details of the Association's advocacy objectives and strategies for the period. It is based on the association's strategic aim and objectives and consistent to its mandate of holistic transformation in the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel.

The EAM advocacy grand strategy affirms that the struggle against injustice is spiritual. The strategy is meant to foster a movement of resistance against systems of exploitation. The advocacy department exists to promote peace, justice and livelihoods through active participation of the Church in advocacy at both local and national levels.

The strategy is an essential framework to guide EAM and its partners in coordinating advocacy work as well as effectively implementing various strategies and activities. It would help to ensure a more coordinated and organised approach to advocacy work and to guide donors on areas of support and interventions that require resources to help the country achieve the locally contextualised Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as expressed in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS).

EAM works through Commissions, one of which is the Ethics, Peace and Justice Commission (EPJC). The Commission was formed to facilitate a common evangelical voice on issues of ethics, peace and justice, with the intention of influencing policy and practice. The Commission's role is to promote greater and effective Church participation in the public arena as the light and salt of society, in addressing ethical, peace and justice concerns in our nation so that people live dignified lives to the glory of God. The strategic areas of focus of the Commission include, among others, economic and social justice issues, good governance, cultural practices, peace building, conflict mediation and resolution, environmental protection and climate change, and domestic as well as gender-based violence.²⁵ The Commission promotes a biblical worldview in tackling issues of ethics, peace and justice.

The Commission's conviction is built around the fundamental values of universal human rights. EPJC presents a clear biblical basis for involvement of the Church in advocacy. For the Commission, advocacy involves both tackling individual cases of injustice or poverty, and tackling systems and structures that allow injustice or poverty to happen. Any systems of exploitation are countered. At a conference held at Blantyre's Victoria Hotel on 14 June 2015, EPJC challenged Church leaders to engage social ills at various levels.

Evangelical Association of Malawi, in conjunction with World Vision Malawi, organised a dinner at Mount Soche Hotel in February 2015 to mobilise Christians to donate towards helping those affected by floods in some districts in the country. Churches were asked to channel their help through EAM. Individuals were asked to donate through phone line companies Airtel and Telekom. The endeavour bore fruit and EAM was instrumental in distributing the items in the affected areas. This shows that EAM understands mission in its holistic sense.

In the area of mission and evangelization, EAM is working in partnership with Dynamic Church Planting International (DCPI) to train church planters and trainers of trainers. Churches have testified how the initiative has equipped them with practical and relevant church planting techniques. The EAM Regional Coordinator for the South, James Kalikwembe, made a presentation to staff of Evangelical Bible College of Malawi (EBCoM) on 11 July 2015 on DCPI. EBCoM staff resolved to incorporate DCPI material into their curriculum. DCPI training will enhance both evangelization for the salvation of lost souls and sustainable discipleship.

In the area of health, EAM is working through Churches and Church organizations to manage HIV related programs which include: HIV prevention, impact mitigation and capacity building, guided by an HIV Policy which was developed by EAM after identifying the need to have such a policy applicable for evangelical churches in Malawi. EAM chairs the Ecumenical Counseling Center which was established in conjunction with other Christian mother bodies to develop the capacity of Churches in counseling especially in the area of HIV and AIDS.²⁶

EAM organizes pre-budget consultations whereby the clergy are equipped with skills for analysing and tracking the national budget. EAM's emphasis is that the budget should be pro-poor and its implementation pro-poverty

oriented. The masses are living on the margins with less than \$1 a day. Malawi is rated as one of the poorest countries in the world. The clergy should have an informed voice as far as national budget making and tracking is concerned. EAM plays a vital role in equipping the clergy and providing a forum for the Church to speak. During an awareness meeting at Mwanza District agriculture extension Area offices early August, EAM's Project Coordinator for the district, Simon Chibwana, sensitized farmers on certified weighing scales and qualities of a recommended trader to buy the crops.²⁷ The message comes in the wake of trade injustice whereby intermediate persons buy pigeon peas from farmers in Mwanza and sell the crop to business persons in Blantyre at very high prices. In so doing, the intermediate persons reap from farmers' sweat. Chibwana urged farmers to form associations for bargaining power. The message is manifestation of EAM's commitment to what could be called the horizontal dimension of mission.

The Association is an embodiment of God's presence in the midst of suffering. It is confirmation that God interacts in history to subvert dehumanising conditions. Jurgen Moltmann says that the effect of Yahweh's revelation is that the hearers of the promise become incongruous with the reality around them, as they strike out in hope towards the promised new future.²⁸ The Church should act against incongruous realities in the world and EAM exemplifies such action.

Lessons from the Association regarding integral mission

The Evangelical Association of Malawi manifests a missiology that is both biblical and contextual. Engagement in socio-economic and political matters has scriptural grounding and is carried out in a manner that bears in mind contextual exigencies. Social engagement without biblical foundation could be termed as 'secular missiology' and would not be integral in the highest sense. Engagement in proclamation of the Gospel for salvation of the soul only at the expense of engagement with contextual realities like injustice and poverty would be neglecting an important part of the mission of the Church.

Life is the central and all-inclusive concept in African cosmology.²⁹ It follows that maintenance and salvation of life in all its dimensions are crucial. EAM's initiatives resonate well with traditional understanding of life as wholeness. Integral mission considers life and salvation as

wholeness. Dion Forster quotes Setiloane saying that the African worldview places a significant emphasis on the wholeness of all being and regards wholeness as a primary aspect of the cosmos.³⁰ He further notes that the maintenance of harmony and equilibrium in the wholeness of creation is of fundamental importance. EAM endeavour to restore harmony and equilibrium where there is spiritual malaise, poverty, disease, corruption and egoism. Integral mission could be understood together with principles of salvation, shalom and life as wholeness.

EAM is missional in Allan Effa's sense. Effa says missional churches understand themselves as incarnational, in the sense that Christians are called to penetrate all levels of society and seek to meet people in their own proximity spaces.³¹ By engaging in social projects like irrigation farming and poverty alleviation, EAM proves to be a missional association. EAM embodies mission ecclesiology whereby mission is essentially ecclesial and the Church is essentially missionary. Along those lines, Esteban Voth argues that a reductionist, partial and dualistic mission is not contemplated in the world view of the Holy Scriptures.³² Biblical mission is integral by its very nature. Fundamentalism or reductionism does injustice to the entire counsel of the Triune God.

David Bosch touches on integral mission when he says:

The missionary task is as coherent, deep, and broad as the exigencies of human life ... the whole Church bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world.³³

EAM manages to engage society without succumbing to what Jurgen Moltmann (1975:3) calls 'religion of society', whereby the Church loses identity and becomes identifiable with social and political movements.³⁴ EAM is maintaining its distinctive Christian identity. The Association brings the whole Gospel to the whole country. It is there for others. Moreover, EAM manages to uphold the Bible as the absolute, rather than relative, base for theologising and social engagement.

EAM manifests Bonhoeffer's mature worldliness and religionless Christianity, which are a critique of secular humanists' unscriptural worldliness. This is very important especially at a time when Malawi is facing the challenge of secular humanism with its promise of bringing social betterment without religion, especially Christianity. A caution to all

is that the Church's withdrawal would be an indirect contribution to flourishing of secular humanism and similar philosophies. When the Church is passive, secular humanism comes in masked as a viable and even better alternative to the Christian faith.

EAM is entrenching people's lives in the ultimate realities of faith and grace while at the same time checking structures of injustice and poverty in the penultimate realm of daily living. In that sense, EAM passes the test of discipleship and displays costly grace. It is not an *associatio religiosus*. Through EAM, we see that the Church is really Christ existing as community and how to simultaneously engage the reality of God and the reality of the world.

¹ *Mission Studies*, Vol. 19-2, 38, 2002

² James Livingston et al, *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 99

³ *ibid.*,

⁴ S.R. Haynes and L.B. Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 85

⁵ *ibid.*, 94

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 486

⁷ John W. de Gruchy (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120

⁸ *op. cit.*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 364-365

⁹ *ibid.*, 503

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 184

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 189

¹² *ibid.*, 486

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 211

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 54-55

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 141

¹⁶ Jens Zimmermann and Brian Gregor (eds), *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), xv

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 58

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 245

¹⁹ Christian Gremmels and Wolfgang Huber (eds), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Auswahl* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 141

²⁰ Gerrit Brand, *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (Frankfurt an Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2002), 66

²¹ *ibid.*, 58

²² John Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology (New edition)* (London: SPCK, 1997), 85

²³ *ibid.*, 86

²⁴ *Evangelical Association of Malawi: Brief Profile*, 2

²⁵ *Evangelical Association of Malawi: Terms of Reference for the Ethics, Peace and Justice Commission*, 1-2

²⁶ *ibid.*, 8

²⁷ *The Nation*, Thursday, 6 August 2015, 8

²⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 100

²⁹ Stephen Okafor, Bantu Philosophy: Placide Tempels Revisited in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 13, Fasc. 2, 1982, BRILL, 91

³⁰ Dion Forster, A Generous Ontology: Identity as a Process of Intersubjective Discovery – An African Theological Contribution in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 1, 2010, 7

³¹ *Missiology*, Vol. 38, January 2010

³² Tetsunao Yamamori & C. Rene Padilla (eds), *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission*, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, 2004), 97

³³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 10

³⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 3

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