

Fighting Poverty: Change of Perception

Report from a UEM Workshop, 10-15 March 2008

Africa is known as the poorest continent of the world. Different reasons are given for this situation, including historical, political, economic reasons. But poverty has two faces: material and mental and as the late Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere, used to say, mental poverty is the worst form of poverty. In fact, nobody can understand why African countries, with all their potentialities, should have the poorest population of the world. It is true that history has not provided the best conditions for the development of Africa. But the time has come to stop complaining and start doing something to get out of the mess. The church also should stop preaching the theology of poverty as a way to heaven. We just need to change our perception of poverty and look at things positively.

This was the motive behind the workshop on Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies which brought together about twenty people from seven UEM member churches in Karagwe from 10 to 15 March 2008. The seminar was jointly organised by the Africa Regional Office of the Fighting Poverty: Change of Perception United Evangelical Mission and the Evangelical Church of Westphalia.

Bishop Dr. Benson Bagonza of ELCT – KAD opened the workshop with a message from John 12: 20 – 33. “God is a God of life, not a God of death,” started Bishop Bagonza. Therefore the mission of God has to be a mission of life and not a mission of death, suffering or poverty. Everything that opposes life, such as war, corruption, suffering, hunger, malnutrition, domestic violence, etc. is not in line with God’s mission. The struggle can continue but the power of evil has been overcome. Christ always stands with the poor and the church has to stand where Christ is, that is to help the poor get out of their poverty.

Using a simple game, Rev. Matthias Elsermann from the Westphalian Evangelical Church showed how an object could be turning clockwise or anti-clockwise depending on the way we look at it. Likewise, poverty can be a challenge or a fatality depending on the point for which we look at it. Then the resource person, Mr. Amulike Ngeliama, showed the importance and advantages of SACCOS especially for people with low income.

The results of the discussions in groups showed that SACCOS play an important role in poverty alleviation. They help empowering communities and assist people to benefit from own economic activities. Churches are called to play an active role to identify the effects of poor financial systems in their respective national economies. Therefore they have to provide economic information for their members and to cooperate with stakeholders to develop sound financial systems which may reach out to the poor. Especially in the Tanzanian context information about the Cooperative Law from 2003 should be spread and the assistance of the District Cooperative Officers should be used.

At the end of the seminar, after they had drawn back home plans, the participants of the seminar committed themselves and recommended to their respective Churches/Dioceses and the UEM Regional Office the following:

- We commit ourselves to work out our back-home plans) and to implement them as soon as possible. We'll share with all the participants of the seminar till latest December 2008 the evaluation of where we are in this process.
- Based on this feed back we will decide on an advanced seminar in 2009.
- We commit ourselves to the sharing of help and knowledge in between the SACCOS and SACCOS Support Units of our Dioceses/ Churches.
- We see the need of support of succeeding SACCOS to improve their work.
- The UEM Regional Office should play the role of a reminder on SACCOS for the Dioceses/Churches in our region and share information:
- We see the strong necessity of networking together: We will use our contacts to share directly information and questions amongst ourselves; by points of common interest we'll provide the UEM Regional Office with copies.
- We shall provide the UEM Regional Office regularly with information about SACCOS so that a page in the UEM "Mission Echo" can be reserved on the SACCOS-topic.
- We recommend that on all UEM meetings and seminars in the Region a short sensitization on SACCOS shall take place.

We are all aware that the longest way begins with the first step. We encourage ourselves to just do what we learned during the seminar!

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