

**“FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION” –**

**REFLECTIONS BY Jacinta van Luijk mhm**

**QUESTION:** A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”? (PD, 26)

**1. INTRODUCTION**

I have been a Mill Hill missionary since 1982, including a period from 2001 to 2009 with the Medical Missionaries of Mary (MMM), and ‘permanent missionary worker’ with the WNM (Week Nederlandse Missionaris - ‘Dutch Missionary Council’) since 2010.

My first ministry was from 1982 – 1998 in the urban apostolate team in the Kisumu shanty-town areas, Pandipieri Catholic Centre, with special attention for community-based health care, nutrition and HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

From 2001 to date, my tasks have been in community education and counselling on HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, violence/trauma and marginalised youths’ issues in Trans Nzoia County under the Kitale Community Advancement Programme (KAP) (formerly ‘Kitale AIDS Programme (KAP)’.

My professional background is in nursing with additional education in health promotion and international development. There also were the Mill Hill Missionaries’ associates training and courses on pastoral and spiritual counselling/apostolic spirituality and retreats.

I feel extremely privileged for all these years, to have been given the opportunity to do the work for which I feel I have been called.

“God’s spirit is in my heart  
He has called me and set me apart  
This is what I have to do; what I have to do...

He sent me to give the good news to the poor  
Tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more  
Tell blind people that they can see  
And set the downtrodden free

And go tell everyone  
The news that the Kingdom of God has come  
And go tell everyone  
The news that God’s Kingdom has come ...

Just as the Father sent me  
So I’m sending you out to be  
My witnesses throughout the world; the whole  
of the world

Don’t carry a load in your pack  
You don’t need two shirts on your back  
God’s workers can earn their own keep; can  
earn their own keep

Don’t worry what you have to say  
Don’t worry because on that day  
God’s spirit will speak in your heart; will speak  
in your heart...”

Song, based on Isaiah 61:1-3 and other texts

**Making a Difference – a Gift from Above – KAP Stories of Change**

**The story of Lucy, a KAP ‘Unreached’ (marginalized) youths’ volunteer in Sabata**

“I am a single mother, 21 years old. My problems started 6 years ago when my parents separated. With difficulty I completed my high school education and started a new chapter in my life. I got a boyfriend and after three

months I found out I was pregnant. Fortunately, my friend promised to support me. However, my mother was very bitter about the situation and tried to force me to have an abortion. I refused and gave birth to twins.

My mother still didn't want to know anything about my boyfriend, nor did she like my children. She hated my friend, called him names and threatened to curse him, although he supported me as he had promised. She threatened me with the same if I continued the relationship. I therefore decided to cut off communication with my boyfriend and move to my grandmother. However, this prompted my children's father to end our relationship, stop supporting his children and after three months to marry another girl. I was shocked, depressed, felt hated and didn't know what to do.

The only option spinning in my mind was to end my life and that of my children. I bought agricultural poison. Unexpectedly, however, we received a visit from my cousin; He had problems and was going to stay for a week. Unfortunately though he found the pesticides I had hidden in the yard. After two days he committed suicide. What a tragedy! I was very shocked and traumatized. I felt incredibly guilty, angry and deeply regretful. Of course I couldn't tell anyone that I had brought the poison into the home to kill myself and my children. Out of frustration, I vented my anger at my children.

It was during this confusing time that KAP came to work in our neighbourhood. I was allowed to participate and through the training and guidance I became aware of myself and the dangers to which I exposed myself and my family. I began to understand myself better and learned about all kinds of important facts, developments and values in life. I began to understand that my mother was also transferring her own anger and frustration about her broken marriage and single parenthood onto us.



Small group discussion in Sabata

The training has taken a heavy weight off my shoulders. I feel healed. I started making choices and I was able to set goals in my life. Also, I now have better communication with my father. He is willing to support me to achieve my goals. I was not aware of the nature and depth of my problems before starting KAP's youths course in April 2021. Many thanks to the KAP family for this bright spot of light in my life.

**The Story of Cherop, a girl-participant in KAP's Course for Trauma/Peace Community Resource Persons (CRPs).**

She lives in an area affected by continuous insecurity and attacks and where the whereabouts of many fathers, brothers and sons is unknown: "My father used to seriously abuse my mother and us children, and eventually left the home and us to fend for ourselves. I was very angry. Therefore, when I was 16 years old, I and my friend decided to burn down the house of my aunt, my father's sister, hence she became homeless. My friend and I took it as great fun and we laughed at her when she was screaming, and undressing herself in despair. However, since then I have been experiencing a very tough situation because whenever I went to sleep I could see my aunt screaming and undressing. When in class I became very confused and often absent-minded. When I came to the workshop I realized the trauma I was in, and decided to go for forgiveness from my aunt. I was able to reconcile with her after four years of great enmity and now we have a good relationship. I am no longer confused and absent-minded, and feel happy. I now wish to pursue a vocational training."

**Input by 'Smart', a CRP-Trauma/Peace and ex-militia member during a KAP trauma/conflict prevention session:** "We fought anyone against us: Spears, machetes, knives and guns, we used everything. Without inhibition, without reflection. We did not think, there was no time. It was kill or be killed. I made countless victims. We ate the food left by fleeing residents and slaughtered abandoned cattle. There were group rapes. We were deceived by politicians who promised us so many good things, money and land. However it was as if they made us cross a river, and when we saw the terrible things we were to do they had taken away the bridge for return. I now know about HIV and that it has been very close to me. I was arrested in November 2008 whilst many of my colleagues were killed by police bullets. I felt very guilty and bad about the things I had done. My mother died out of shock when she heard of the role I played. In prison, I collapsed psychologically and physically and lost all hope. When after two years I was released KAP helped me to deal with my feelings of guilt and shame. However most people in my community still mistrust me and find it hard to believe that I have changed. I am now here to advise you strongly, especially the young amongst you, not to be lured into fighting: It will wreck your life".

**KAP abuse/addiction Client Eric:** “I suffered from low self-esteem, depression, lack of self-confidence and addiction problems. I was also violent and people were afraid of me. Alcohol was my best friend, and I brewed gin for income. After joining KAP’s community-based addiction treatment programme, I stopped brewing and



Eric selling soup and bites

gradually also stopped drinking. Instead, I went to the slaughterhouse very early in the morning to get free hooves and heads to make soup for sale. I also secretly cut saplings from a plantation at night for sale in home construction. However, one day when cutting down trees, the police caught me and broke my leg in two places. I couldn't work anymore, couldn't go to the hospital, there was no food in the house, and my wife ran away. Once again alcohol became very tempting.

Fortunately our neighbourhood trainer Tom saw my problems and helped me to get hospital help. My leg has now healed, I can do my soup business again and my wife has come back. You have made me feel like a valued person”.

During the monthly counselling supervision session **KAP Community Trainer George** reports that his robbers had to appear in court again, and just hoped that this time they would not be set free again. Three weeks ago, his house had been raided for the third time by a neighbour and her team. This middle-aged woman was a notorious gin brewer and also dealt in drugs. This time she had punched holes in the walls and windows of George's house—other neighbours had saved him. Her reason was that she was angry that George was ‘stealing’ her abusing customers. When asked whether he wasn't too afraid, George replied that he was very happy with the results of his (mostly voluntary) work, and determined to continue...

An enthusiastic **KAP Community Trainer Mr. Kibe** in his report of the successful Kobos ‘Unreached Youths’ workshop in December 2021 remarks: “You see, each one is called to be a priest as well as a prophet to self and others”...

### **BEING A ‘LAY-MISSIONARY’**

As a missionary I have been an ‘associate’ or ‘lay’.

Mill Hill Missionaries (MHM) have made this possible, and also provided the resources and space for continuous learning. For this I am truly grateful. It is also special and encouraging to share vision, ideals and a spiritual motivation with several fellow missionaries.

Deep gratitude too, I feel for the teams in which I have been allowed to work. These have been intercultural and with intense opportunities for friendship and sharing. Our current team is deliberately interdenominational and interfaith. We are motivated, driven and strengthened by our faiths, and it is not difficult to find each other in the shared aim and objectives of our work. Instead of being hindered by theological arguments, ‘being lay’ makes it easy to focus on our shared God-given humanity. Our different denominations/faiths’ ‘entry-points’ have been enriching. We pray and reflect together, encourage each other and we have become friends.

It has been a real privilege to be engaged in ‘matters of practical daily life’. Although not easy, the results are equally energizing. Most of our staffs and community trainers are very committed to their work, often spontaneously going many extra miles.

Thanks to the character of our work, participants open up about their personal lives to such a degree, that I sometimes wonder if this is maybe how it feels to hear confessions. We are fortunate to have the

opportunity to try help people work out their 'way forward' after they become aware of themselves and the challenging situations in their lives.

In my experience, being 'just lay' also has the great advantage of easy participation in fellow people's lives: No need for special reverence, food, accommodation or protocol – just join them as any other neighbour.

I am a missionary: Together with my fellow human beings, finding and working out the God-given mission of our lives, with a special eye for appreciating our differences.

However, I feel that the word 'lay' is not a good one: It denotes something sub-standard, fake, like a carpenter who is neither qualified nor really fit to do his/her work...

And yet, as Mr. Kibe remarked, have we not all been called to be 'a priest'?

### **Companions on the Journey?**

My experience over the years is that appreciation of the priestly role of 'lay' people is personal rather than structural. Yes! There is official recognition in church documents, and especially congregations have dared to translate these into practical steps. However, vagueness remains, 'traditional' perceptions persist to dominate and often the majority of 'lay-people of God' is perceived as the lowest on the ladder of holiness, participation and authority. Sometimes we even seem to become extinct (e.g. as lay-missionaries).

In 1982, when applying to the Catholic Bishop for his permission for me to join the Pandipieri Urban Apostolate team as a lay-missionary, he replied "not to have any objection". Unfortunately, the Dutch governmental JVC fund felt that this was showing insufficient commitment, and refused its funding.

"In 2009, upon departure of the Sisters, an agreement was made for KAP to henceforth work separately from the Catholic Church. In order to operate effectively, the programme needed to continue to have its financial- and other 'decision power' and answerability, and also space to spread its wings. This, and also fears of KAP's condoms-teaching and interdenominational/ interfaith character, now under the guidance of a lay-missionary, were responsibilities that the Church felt unable to carry. We were allowed to continue using part of our offices.

Whereas we welcomed and were grateful for this decision, I also feel that the reasons mentioned point towards certain problems in the Church."

In general, the official Catholic Church hierarchy, even several fellow priest-missionaries, keep their careful distance. "We are theologians, not social workers" a parish priest told us. "Yes, we should also have attention for humanitarian issues" consoled another, as if this was not his core business. In our work we constantly meet huge spiritual questions, on the purpose of life, on how to live daily life, on how to relate as human beings, of worthlessness, uselessness, loneliness and despair. These often are not taken up by Church leaders and workers as issues to be considered beyond a prayer. There is no happiness in the Church that prisoners are prisoners no more, the blind can see and the downtrodden are now free...

When a doctor, lawyer or finance officer commits her/himself to serving the Catholic Church they are welcomed as great lay workers, who are sacrificing their careers. However, in my view this is not what lay-participation means: The role of lay-people is in another dimension, and not subject to societal ranks or classes.

Over the years some priest-missionaries have told me that as a 'lay-missionary' I lack commitment, and that I am a 'fence-sitter', too undecided and scared to choose religious life ...

In order to be true companions on the journey, in my view deep reflection followed by a radical overhaul of mentality towards priesthood, and being a missionary and God's witness is needed. Both within the Church's hierarchy as well as amongst the general public.

Formation of ALL plays a big role in this.

### **Practical Matters Hindering Progress**

#### **What Many People Like To Hear**

Sunday Nation (Kenya), February 27, 2022, page 6

In reaction to a complaint that churches were accepting "dirty money", the political leaders "asked (...) to refrain from insulting religious leaders (...)". "The Church is holy. Whether you like it or not, you have to respect it and its leadership. (...) When we come to power we will start by sanctifying the Church".

In my view there are main issues in the Catholic Church (and elsewhere too) that block the Holy Spirit in its work. They also prevent people from listening, understanding and participating. They often involve hypocrisy.

In my experience, due to these matters, I cannot "Go and tell everyone the news that the Kingdom of God has come". For example, in the Netherlands regarding my being a Christian and missionary I usually have to very carefully weigh my words, and 'live faith in action' rather than talking about it.

In my view the first and foremost issue to be addressed is the fear within the Church: Fear to listen to the Unknown, fear to love, fear for responsibility ... etc.

Other major matters I see are: Insufficient attention for critical issues in the world, "the urgent cries of God's creation" (e.g. environmental disasters, war and peace, etc.); financial management, transparency and answerability (also including the use of 'dirty money'; the role of 'money' (in many aspects the Church has literally sold its soul, condones corruption and severe greed. Some of my Kenyan friends refuse further participation in Small Christian Communities as "they are only about money". Others complain that "the Catholic Church is too expensive to belong to"); full participation of women (surely, the lack of this in the Catholic Church is completely incomprehensible, unjust to God's creation and deeply painful); the structure of authority in the Catholic Church (as it is, the 'higher levels' are able to block any progress); the admission and management of 'sin' within the Church (e.g. all sorts of abuse, sexual abuse, etc.); Narrow views on and management of sexuality, celibacy; Etc.

I seem often to observe confusion in handling matters of forgiveness, compassion and management of criminal deeds.

### **What to Do**

- Deep and honest reflection, guided by 'spiritually-trained psychologists'... Towards a real change of mentality – back to the source of Christ's message;
- Revival of 'real' Small Christian Communities
- Mandatory formation in critical societal and environmental issues;
- Reflect on 1 Cor 12:12-30 re. the different parts of the body...
- Etc.