THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VALUES, RELIGIOUS TEACHING AND DEVELOPMENT CONCEPTS

REPORT ON RaD DISSEMINATION WORKSHOP
HEL D ON 27th NOV 2010
At Makumira University College, Arusha, Tanzania.
Ahmad Kipacha

Summary of activities

The half day workshop was officially opened by Rev. Dr Elieshi Mungure on behalf of the Provost. There were a total of 67 participants including religious leaders, local leaders, Makumira University College (MUCo) staff, secondary school students and their teachers, and members of the general public. Some of the informants in the study were unable to attend due to age, illness or travel but most had sent representatives. The MUCo’s chaplain, Rev. Dr. Faustine Mahali, had earlier informed his congregation about the workshop, helping to draw in some local churchgoers and theological students.

Dr Ahmad Kipacha presented his findings in Kiswahili. Summary papers were also available in English and Swahili.

Several issues emerged during the discussion that followed:

- The complexities of religious leadership and local governance and politics.
- The persistence of patriarchal culture and gender inequalities in both the church and traditional Meru society.
- Local Christian teachings and women’s rights.
- The aftermath of the 1990-93 Lutheran church crisis and the pace of the healing process.
- Voices of the new generation (youth) and the role of parenthood in Meru.
- Church and traditional leaders as agents of peace and tranquility.
- Christian teachings and the propagation of honest citizenship.
- Evidence of the FBO Compassion’s role; the case of Singisi Secondary School.
- Women’s status in the north and south of Tanzania.

After a heated debate, in which many of the women and youth participants shared many of their reservations, the chairperson welcomed Deputy Provost Academic Affairs (DPAA) to say a vote of thanks. She thanked all the participants for attending the first ever dissemination workshop to be held at Makumira Community. She praised the idea of disseminating research findings, as exemplary and encouraged other researchers to emulate the RaD approach, asserting that it is part of Makumira College’s mission to work with the local community. Most participants expressed satisfaction that they had not simply been ‘used’ as informants, welcomed the idea of being part and parcel of the research process and promised to reveal more when approached again. A key local religious leader, Rev. Abdiel Ndossi, ELCT Secretary General of Meru Diocese, urged the researchers to cast a second look at the intricate relations between the ethos of the churches versus traditional Meru values, and expressed an interest in the full final version of the report.
Key issues raised by participants

Gender inequalities and subjugation

Several female participants felt that the extent of women’s subjugation and the nature of the patriarchal system in Meru was only partially covered in the report, suggesting that the report should explore the causes, dynamics and persistence of inequality in more depth. They pointed out, for example, that the majority of Meruians, whether ‘educated’ and ‘baptized’ or not, still fear and revere the power of a ‘curse’ from their parents, grandparents or traditional leaders. They also felt that marital values and widowhood should be discussed. They claimed that church leaders do not try to tackle the structural causes of gender equity and obstacles to equity and justice for women and youths.

They noted a number of examples of gender segregation. For example, they noted that “it is like a written law that women are producers and men are spenders”: coffee is male-owned, but has to be cultivated and processed by women, bananas and vegetables are female property, women are allowed to sell milk but not to share the proceeds of selling a cow, women are allowed to cultivate various types of beans but only on the condition that any cash earned from selling the highly priced kidney beans has to be handed to the husband in line with Meru custom, although women can cultivate and sell other types of lower priced beans in the market.

Surprisingly, female participants used this rare platform to reveal more male ‘atrocities’ than we had gathered during our field work. However, the tone of the discussion was friendly, with most male church leaders defending their actions and at times the logic behind some traditional Meru ‘patriarchal’ values, such as the preference given to boys with respect to inheritance practices.

One participant pointed out that women in the ‘matrilineal’ south of Tanzania enjoy more freedom than their counterparts in the ‘patrilineal’ northern part of the country, insisting that the position of women in Meru has not changed for decades and accusing the churches of failing to dismantle the structures that keep women inferior to men:

“They are ... sole bread winners, pay school fees for their children, go to the market, [and] sell milk, but are not allowed to keep the earnings or inherit land. Boys have continued to be highly favoured over girls in the whole of Meru. For example, if a girl dies before wedlock she is supposed to be buried on the outskirts of the farm for fear of a ‘curse’ while boys never face such ‘symbolic’ segregation.”

A female participant complained that if a girl gets pregnant while she is still schooling, she is the one who has to leave school and faces dehumanizing stigma, while her partner continues to enjoy ‘freedom’ and a ‘warrior’ status. She alleged that no one who has impregnated a schoolgirl has ever been punished. Even female workers in the church and its affiliated institutions have to make a humiliating ‘exit’ from service if they get pregnant out of wedlock, whereas even if the responsible man is a co-worker, he is not shamed or taken to task.

A senior woman participant stressed the need for advocacy, behavioural changes and positive cultural intervention to address gender inequality, arguing that the church hierarchy is still dominated by male theologians, with women lacking the self-confidence to join the leadership for fear of being stigmatized, even by other women. A male reverend added that even the number of men seeking to enter the priesthood is declining.

The aftermath of the 1990-93 ELCT Church crisis
The researchers were challenged to explore this matter more thoroughly. After the crisis, the church lost ‘direction’, confided the ELCT Meru Diocese Secretary General: “We had to start afresh to build trust, harmony, and leadership infrastructure in our diocese.” The pace of the healing process, he added, is encouraging, but success has only been achieved at the community level and much is still needed to heal familial wounds. Some of the ongoing tensions between ELCT, breakaway groups and local government leaders were discussed.

**Peace and sustainable development**

The majority of the participants expressed the view that sustainable development is not possible without peace: “There cannot be development of any sort without peace of mind and body at the individual, family and society levels at large”, one participant claimed. There is a desire for religious teachers to be considered ‘agents of peace’ in their localities, because “We are gatekeepers of peace, people trust us and we live among them.” The issue of who is going to bring together people with different political allegiances following the 2010 elections was raised. Furthermore, one participant bewailed the treacherous relationship between the government and the church, pointing out that government cannot afford to provide social services to all its people, while

“The church has built schools, hospitals and staffed them yet the same government cannot even support the church to pay for the salaries of workers who provide services to entire communities without any form of prejudice or segregation. [In his view] Government has to change this outlook and consider the two as equal development partners by budgeting for this, [because] the Church cannot stand to see its people suffer”

**Religion and politics**

Participants confirmed the researchers’ finding that religious teachers have important roles to play in their localities, but queries the difficult relationship between religion and politics, noting that religious leaders cannot be apolitical if they are to execute their duties effectively, and politicians are religious. Some participants felt that the government plays a hypocritical game; it only uses religious leaders when necessary and where it matters most, including certain political agendas such as preaching ‘peace and tranquility’. In the view of participants, the relationship between the church and local government needs to be amicably re-established during such difficult times of political and societal transformation. They stressed that politicians should work hand in hand with local religious leaders, because the latter are expected to be good examples, are emulated by people, and can make useful comments on social, cultural, economic and political issues.

**The future for young people**

One student participant raised the issue of the fate of young people, who are not sure of their future, fearing that only a few will be able to develop local livelihoods, while many will have to move elsewhere. They suggested that the researchers should have made more effort to collect the views and aspirations of young people, and not just adults.

**The Church and riches**

Participants, especially religious leaders, recognized the challenge raised by the findings that they do not normally question the means by which followers have gained their riches, admitting that they need to question followers to see if they are involved in any illegally activities, and that
the Church must lead in the fight against corruption and embezzlement – there was agreement that ‘bloody’ tithes should not be accepted, even at the cost of losing adherents.

The role of the FBO Compassion

The headmistress of Sing’isi secondary school confirmed the benefits of Compassion International’s involvement in sponsoring the costs of schooling for poor students around Meru, especially girls, regardless of their religious affiliation.

The workshop

A number of participants expressed satisfaction with the objective and design of the dissemination workshop, with most feeling that it was a ‘unique’ workshop. They reported that they had been involved in several research projects conducted in their area, but that none of the researchers had returned to present their findings. They welcomed the invitation to informants to confirm what they had said earlier, stressing that it provides reassurance that their voices have been correctly presented, although one participant cautioned that some areas in the translated version of the paper diluted the content of what he had previously said.

Participants praised RaD for researching such an important and sensitive aspect of society, as religion is said to “be everything” and here to stay. In their view any discussion and systematic evaluation of religious issues is worth undertaking, although most expressed the need for our analysis to go into greater depth on some issues, especially the clash between the ideal and women’s actual position and roles in society.