



Accompaniment: a lens and methodology for mission today

*Produced by the ELCA Global Mission Unit
under the executive direction of Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla*

The ELCA Global Mission Unit defines accompaniment as *Walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality*. In this walk, gifts, resources, and experiences are shared with mutual advice and admonition to deepen and expand our work within God's mission.

You can find a 38-minute articulation of accompaniment in a DVD featuring GM Executive Director Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla called the *2007 Global Mission Executive Briefing*. This short paper outlines the theological understandings underpinning accompaniment that are introduced in the DVD.

Context of accompaniment

ELCA's usage of the concept of accompaniment began in conversation with companion churches about a new way of engaging in mission. The conversation began among Lutheran churches in Latin America and was captured in the 1995 ELCA Latin American and Caribbean Regional Strategy.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Presented to the board of the ELCA Division for Global Mission by the president of the Lutheran Church of Nicaragua, the Strategy shaped “Global Mission in the Twenty-first Century: A Vision of Evangelical Faithfulness in God’s Mission,” a document that has guided ELCA Global Mission since it was published in 1999.

This conversation acknowledged that good things have been achieved through the faithful service of missionaries and mission agencies: churches have been started, education and healthcare have been provided. On the other hand, local culture was often denied or ignored, local people were excluded from decision making, and local churches experienced dependency rather than autonomy in their relationships with mission agencies.

Because we want to be accountable and faithful in God’s mission, where all narratives are held in God’s story, we reflect on our mission practices and continue to define our engagement in global mission as the context of mission changes.

Since 1900, the number of Christians in Africa has *increased* by 4,400 percent. By 2025, there will be almost 600 million Christians in Africa, while in Europe, the number of Christians will *drop* by 18 million. What does this mean for ELCA members as we engage the world?

Accompaniment is not a new theology but a new theological understanding of mission methodology. It is a living concept that continues to be articulated and contextualized as we North American Lutherans learn from our history of mission practice and our current engagement with companion churches.

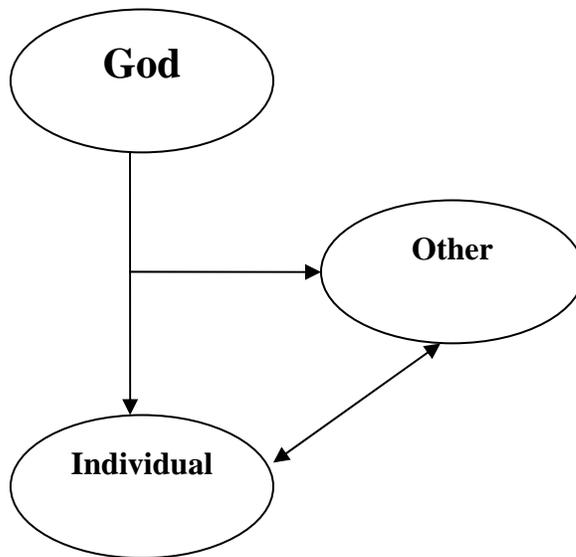
We are sent because God is a sending God

The Latin theological term *Missio Dei* can be translated as “Mission of God.” It describes those activities within the divine Trinity by which the way for mission is prepared. God’s mission is the process of creating, redeeming and sustaining all of creation. All mission, or God’s activity in the world, flows from God’s nature. Part of ELCA’s mission statement is “Claimed, gathered and sent by God’s grace for the sake of the world” comes out of the understanding that because God sends, we too are sent.

Justification and sanctification

Confirmation is one of the places where Lutherans learn that God’s work is like a two-movement symphony: justification and sanctification.

Justification & Sanctification



Justification is the movement of God towards us. Through Christ, God declares us justified, and restores community with us.

In the same manner, God empowers us to restore community among ourselves by entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation. This is the second movement of God's symphony, what we Lutherans call sanctification. God's action frees us from our worst enemy, our concern with the self, which we can call navel gazing. Through justification and sanctification, God lifts our chin so that our gaze moves from our self to the Other. The Holy Spirit empowers us to tackle the hard work of reconciliation, of restoring community with others.

Reconciliation, then is at the center of mission.

Scripture through the lens of accompaniment

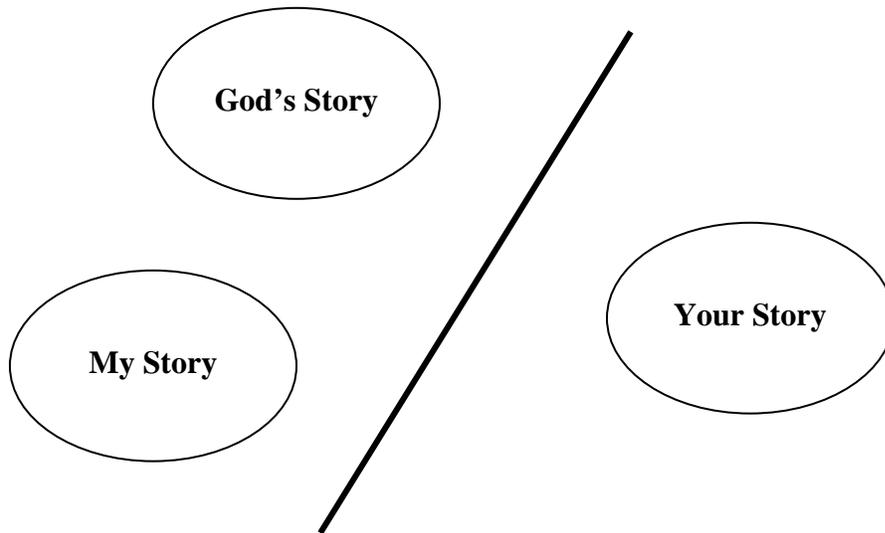
Luke 15:1-11 tells the story of a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep that has wandered away from his flock of 100. Sometimes when this passage is interpreted for mission, the emphasis is placed on the lost sheep. The lost sheep becomes the "Other"—separate from the 99, the one who is different, the one who is lost. The 99 decide who is lost and what they need in order to be found, and do all the searching, making the lost sheep the object of their mission. In this interpretation, there is a danger that the church will take the place of the shepherd.



Dr. Philip Huber reinterprets this scripture out of an African understanding of community by placing the emphasis on the 99. Instead of seeking the lost one, the 99 understand that they are incomplete without the Other. This provides a different motive for reaching out to the Other.

Implications

Three stories relate to one another in mission: God’s story, my story, your story.

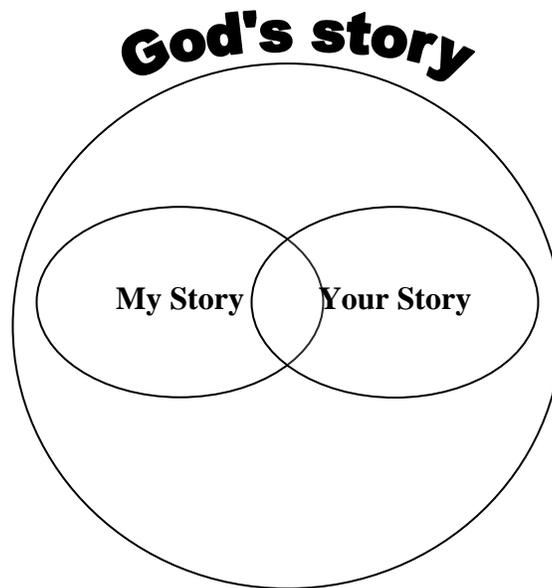


Often, in the history of mission, lines have been drawn that disconnected these stories, creating an “other” that, like the lost sheep, became an object of mission.

Whose side of the story has God been on? When the lines put God on our side of the story, the “other” has to *become* in order to *belong*. The stories and narratives of those on the other are denied or robbed of their value.

Theologian J. Paul Rajashekar notes that the insistence of some missionaries that Asian Christians “reject or vilify the religious and spiritual heritage of their native cultures” has made many “strangers to their own culture and context.” As a result there are many “churchless Christians who ... have no desire to affiliate themselves with the organized church.”

One goal of accompaniment is to acknowledge that God through Christ has erased the line so that our stories are held together within God’s story, like the Trinity. Stories exist both individually and in community, like this:



Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in his presentation at the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, called the center the “Jesus’s spot”. In accompaniment, we proclaim and serve from this “Jesus spot.”

Impure motives for mission

When we draw the line between “my story”, “God’s story”, and “your story,” and engage the “other” from this perspective, we are engaging in what theologian Johannes Verkuyl calls “impure motives of mission.” Verkuyl identifies four prominent barriers that have traditionally stood in the way of engaging in mission out of a reality that incorporates all our narratives in God’s story:

1. The imperialist motive (turning natives into docile subjects of colonial authorities)
2. The cultural motive (mission as the transfer of the missionary’s “superior” culture)
3. The romantic motive (the desire to go to far away and exotic countries and peoples)
4. The ecclesiastical colonialism motive (the urge to export one’s own confession and church order to other territories)



Conclusion

Accompaniment is a lens not only for interpreting scripture but also for reading the history of mission. As we review mission history, we can discern where our activities have been driven by “impure motives” as well as where we have developed “best practices” that we can hold onto as we deepen and expand our engagement with ELCA companions.

This paper and the DVD on accompaniment are intended to help us broaden our understanding of God’s action in the world today and prompt us to heed God’s call to continue participating in God’s mission.

Moving into accompaniment

In summary, accompaniment moves from our reality towards a reality symbolized by the indwelling of community in the Trinity. A reality that is here and yet to come.

Change of Perception

From

Establishing
Dependent Church
My & God’s Story
Pearl Merchant
Over There
Dependency
Colonial
Short-term
Charity
Talking
Teacher
Suggesting

To

Accompanying
Four Selves Church
Our Story
Treasure Hunter
Everywhere
Ecosystems
Egalitarian
Sustainable
Justice
Active Listening
Active Learner
Comprehending



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God's work. Our hands.