

Church and state in Kenya and the role of Help a Child

Author: Albert Hengelaar

The Help a Child Foundation was founded in the 1960s with the explicit aim of supporting independent churches in the south of the world with children's work. This was intended to promote the development of indigenous societies. The founders of Help A Child were neo-Calvinists. At the forefront is Hans Rookmaaker, who, together with his wife Anky, had thought through the concept. Help A Child was aware of the importance of pluralism and equality in a society, but also of the role of good education for children. The organization was way ahead of its time with its approach, which has worked particularly well in Kenya.

After the Western failure in Afghanistan, Prof. Beatrice de Graaf referred to the Western image of the south of the world in a talk show with the metaphor “geopolitical illiteracy”. Perhaps it is better to speak of “societal illiteracy” here. Help A Child did not fall into that trap 55 years ago.

For the right perspective it is necessary to say something about the historic situation in Kenya. The colonial powers established Kenya's borders without regard to natural barriers or social structures. Kenya lacked a large river that could serve as a border and little or nothing was known about the inhabitants of the country in Berlin in 1884, where the dominant colonial powers divided Africa. Kenya emerged as a country with straightened borders.

The borders, drawn simply as a line, are the national borders of Kenya to this day. Looking back, it is striking that the country at that time did not have a strong tribal structure with monarchical traits, as in some other places. It was more a collection of related families living together with a way of life determined by the means of subsistence and terrain. This made it extra difficult to unify the country,

which was necessary for the colonizers. The British had set their economic sights on Uganda (the source of the Nile) and saw Kenya through the lens of transport needs. In the absence of a river, a railway line was built. There was a security need to maintain the regime and to recoup the investments.

The entire colonial process was accompanied by actions that forced the original population into a uniform straitjacket, whereby the tribal differences came to the fore all the more. Before the arrival of the British, wealth was seen in terms of livestock ownership. The groups functioned on the basis of family ties, trade and services. Social differences did not prevail and the richer people had a responsibility for the whole. The British handled contacts with the local population through chiefs, a function that did not exist before that time. This stimulated tribal divisions. After the departure of the British in the 1960s, the chiefs and their environment benefited most from self-determination, because they had maintained the contacts with the colonial government.

And then there was the Christian mission, which was able to work in Kenya in relative freedom. The churches associated with the colonial rulers tended to operate in the areas where colonial rule was strongest. For example, the institutionalized denominations, in East Africa especially the Anglican and Catholic Church, concentrated on areas in the central and most developed part. In Kenya one also finds independent groups that kept aloof from the colonizers, such as the Quakers. Even now half of the Quakers worldwide live in Kenya! One of the mission organizations was the Africa Inland Mission (AIM), which started in 1895. AIM was strongly represented in the less central parts of Kenya, also the poorer parts.

With regard to African countries, how a country forms a stable and social whole is a question that is

still very relevant. It is a fact that the borders of countries in Africa have been drawn by outsiders. But what is the role of churches in a society like Kenya? Much has been written about Kenya, especially from a Western perspective. Prof. Paul Giffords book *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya* states: "Churches are the main form of associational life in Kenya." He also provides painful details about foreign influence through missions and relief efforts. He literally says that there is a Christian economy that thrives on financing from the west and Korea. What we don't hear from Gifford is that the same goes for the politicians. The countries with economic power solicit the favors of African governments with aid or trade as a stick behind the door.

How people feel about it in Kenya itself can be seen from the statement of the Kenyan ambassador to the U.N. in New York on February 22, 2022 in the Security Council about the Russian invasion of Ukraine: "If African states had chosen to pursue states on the basis of ethnic, racial, or religious homogeneity, we would still be waging bloody wars these many decades later". You can almost hear him say: "We did it differently than the continent of the great wars, Europe." His remark shows a good sense of history.

These data are important if we want to understand and appreciate Help a Child's collaboration with the Africa Inland Church, Kenya. Help A Child co-founder Hans Rookmaaker was a keen advocate of looking beyond what happens after change has happened. He spoke about this in a Q&A session at Westminster Seminary in the United States. He explains that societies need to grow through internal growth and adds that missionaries consider people from the South "too stupid for complex organizations". That inhibits personal responsibility and that is why Rookmaaker considered indigenous organization as very important. He is therefore not only concerned with the flourishing of personal faith, but also with the structure in which the believer functions. As a Kuyperian and descendant of a family of intercultural administrators, he will certainly also have thought of the

church as a public body. As a Calvinist he knew that internal church strength and democracy is a contribution to the larger society.

This aspect is reflected in the actions of the Help A Child board. In Kenya, this meant working under the national leadership of the Church. Striking remark in the Help a Child annual report of 1976, also in the light of building unity in a country: “the projects in Kenya provide a home for children from different population groups”. In the annual report of 1978, the national character of the work and of the church is discussed in more detail. Pastors from all over the country can make proposals for helping children. And this national character also applied to the staff. The A.I.C. tried to do something about the situation created by the colonizers and to look for unity in church and country. We see the hand of bishop Wellington Mulwa of the A.I.C. We will hear more about him later.

And what church are we talking about at the Africa Inland Church, Kenya, as it is officially called? It was the result of the work undertaken by the Africa Inland Mission since 1895. The missionaries had been able to build a large community of faith throughout the country and especially in the poorer areas. However, the self-determination of the national church was insufficiently promoted. In practice the Mission continued to dominate. Exactly what Hans Rookmaaker was afraid of. The bottom line is that at the time of the independence struggle, the entire process of independence had yet to begin. Formally, the church existed since 1943, but the Mission remained dominant in decision-making for a long time. The Mission apparently did not see change as urgent on this point, but instead it had to deal with people who had been touched by the gospel and who experienced this as a liberation, also from the colonial yoke. As late as 1956, at the International Conference of the Mission, it is stated: “While no action is taken on the question of representation of the African Church at the International Conference, yet it is realized that we must constantly bear in mind that the day is soon dawning. that it is necessary to make a decision in this matter.” Anyone who would

think that change would soon follow will be disappointed. A kind of apartheid is created by the Mission by declaring that missionaries are not members of local churches but primarily of the global church as a whole. In 1959, it is declared explicitly as undesirable to “change the statutes of the Mission to permit representatives of the Church to participate in Field Councils”. The later Bishop Wellington Mulwa had already asked the Mission for this “almost in despair” twenty years (!) earlier. In the mission, the call for national structures remained that of those crying in the wilderness.

A special situation occurred in 1966, shortly after Kenyan independence in 1964. The story reads like a missionary course from the Church to the Mission. The Africa Inland Mission wanted to leave the Council of Churches because it was said to be too liberal theologically. The church was not involved in the decision making beforehand. In the minutes of a meeting of the missionaries the conviction can be found that the church will agree to the decision of the Mission. It is believed, as can be read explicitly, that the church sees the mission as “better informed in this area”. The decision came to the attention of the church in the informal circuit. What follows is a piece of first class church diplomacy. The Church affirmed to the Mission that it was important to work together with the Mission and that the Mission is important to the Church. But, it added, "when parents see a house on fire, they don't rush out without taking their children with them." That message was understood and at the next meeting of the missionaries it all sounded completely different: in the future the Mission wanted to make decisions only “after consulting the main board of the A.I.C.” It never came to a departure from the Council of Churches at all. After further squabbles, an agreement was reached in 1971 whereby missionary work would formally fall under the Church.

The process of becoming independent from the Mission gained momentum with the appointment of the Kenyan chairman of the A.I.C. in 1970, Wellington Mulwa (1918-1979). Rev. Mulwa was a self-confident national leader who held the Mission accountable. The Mission had produced a church

that was already one of the largest denominations in Kenya and, importantly in the context of this essay, spread across the country. It connected the different population groups and had a positive effect on national cohesion. In addition its organizational structure is democratic and not adhering to a global compact like the Anglicans and Catholics.

But a main church or cathedral was nowhere to be found. All the emphasis was on the local church congregations. The Church had no office, while the Mission did. This may not matter much in Europe due to human rights and the rule of law long in existence. But it plays a major role in a developing society with its enormous process of self-determination. The church has a better chance of stability if there is good internal coordination. You can also turn it around: a local church is more vulnerable to outside influence.

Mulwa understood that very well and immediately opened a national office. It was opened by the Vice President of Kenya, who was a member of the A.I.C. Mulwa was strongly opposed to foreign leadership and had to struggle to keep the missionaries functioning under the church. This escalated to such an extent that at his death some of them saw his untimely demise as a sign from God, according to information that is still available today in the library of Wheaton College, U.S.A.

Mulwa became a bishop in 1973, much to the chagrin of the Mission. He was asked not to use the title of bishop when visiting America! Mulwa wanted the pastors to be recognizable in society by their collar. That too met with opposition. This perhaps well-intentioned opposition shows that the missionaries viewed the social process in which the church was involved from their own Western perspective. This was a regrettable mistake, which is still common in development aid today.

The West in the 21st century understands that countries in the South go their own way, but they fail to support the processes that are necessary to create constitutional states with individual rights in

the South of the world as well. This goes far beyond creating a legal framework, as is attempted in human rights. For Mulwa, the church belonged in society. He was against ecclesiastical isolationism. He accused the missionaries of having an old-fashioned "mission station mentality". In an unromantic paraphrase of the parable of the salt of the earth, he likened life on the mission station to stinking dung. In his view the missionaries should mingle with the people in order to carry the gospel forward with fruit.

Very illustrative is that Mulwa remained active in both the Council of Churches and the Evangelical Alliance. That caused bad blood, even though Mulwa took a stand for evangelical values at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975. People with knowledge of that time of polarization in the west will see that this was very special and that Mulwa was half a century ahead of his time. You can also say: in Africa people do not suffer from the same prejudices as in the west. From the perspective of Help a Child God is at work in a new society.

The final agreements between the Mission and the Church were not ratified until after Mulwa's death in 1979. Such was the opposition Mulwa encountered in the large missionary community of the Africa Inland Mission. People had difficulty with the assertiveness embodied by him. This can also be seen in the historiography of the Mission, in which the all-important Mulwa is barely mentioned. At his funeral in 1979, a Supreme Court judge spoke of "Mulwa's 30-year war" with the Mission. During the time of Mulwa's leadership, the Church grew strongly. Today, the A.I.C. is the largest denomination in Kenya.

And Bishop Wellington Mulwa was the man Mrs. Rookmaaker met when visiting Kenya. They became allies. Mrs. Rookmaaker came to help children but also had a good understanding of how organizational processes can work in a non-Western context. We have seen this above when we

discussed her husband's ideas. She gave this ample opportunity and the board of Help a Child saw this as the right policy. In the missionary literature this is recorded as follows: "He [Mulwa] developed a personal relationship with the Dutch philanthropist Anna Marie Rookmaaker (1915-2003), who in the mid-1960s had developed child sponsorship schemes for underprivileged children in Africa and Asia. Rookmaaker was the wife of the well-known Evangelical scholar and activist, Henderik Roelof 'Hans' Rookmaaker (1922-1977). Mrs. Rookmaaker (affectionately known as 'Anky') was troubled by paternalistic attitudes among Western missionaries and held deep convictions about indigenous church leadership. She circumvented traditional mission agencies and preferred working directly with national leaders. In 1968 Anky established the organization Redt een Kind (Save a Child) for the purpose of providing aid to orphans in Africa and India. Mulwa used the funds he raised through Rookmaaker to open homes for underprivileged children on vacant AIM mission stations."

It is noteworthy that this quote is also mentioned in Mulwa's biography as one of the few positive contributions from abroad to the national church formation of the A.I.C.! Far ahead of others, the independence of non-Western churches and countries was taken seriously here and seen as part of the growth of the nation and the rule of law. The U.N. in 1948 put the right to self-determination of countries central, but for the west it took time getting used to this, to put it mildly. The rise of development aid (from 1965) therefore had more to do with the ideological battle between capitalism and communism. The minister of development aid from 1967-1971 in Help a Child's home country the Netherlands spoke the memorable words that development aid is self-interest. In all honesty, this is a perfect explanation why the West is really coming to Africa. And it is to our own detriment. In that respect, little has changed. Maybe the names but not the powers. Self-determination of peoples is not taken seriously. This is how one builds a world that is unstable and therefore not sustainable. It is, however, a playing field for those who believe themselves to be powerful through financial and military power.

Bishop Mulwa came to the Netherlands in September 1979 for a meeting with the board of Help A Child and a tour of sponsoring churches. He was met with great enthusiasm. This must have been a special and encouraging signal for him. Shortly after his visit the devastating news came that he had passed away, barely 61 years old. Help a Child's annual report for 1979 opens with the announcement of his death: "The sad news reached us that Bishop W.E. Mulwa of the Africa Inland Church, Kenya, died on Sunday, November 11, 1979. A great loss, not only for his church, but also for us. He took the initiative to set up children's homes in collaboration with us. And this collaboration was proficient. This became even more apparent during the visit he paid to our country in September 1979, shortly before his death. He then gave a few presentations and in this way brought children's work in Kenya very close to us. People from around the country attended his presentations. We will miss him very much." The annual report also notes: "The children's work in Kenya was the initiative of Bishop Mulwa and when he died we were concerned at first that the work would not be able to continue in the same way. Fortunately, this concern turned out to be unfounded. His assistant, who was fully aware of the work, put us at ease (...)" Help A Child was concerned that much had depended on Bishop Mulwa's vision regarding children's work in Kenya. However, it turns out that his untimely death had not jeopardized this. This church was more than a tribal or personal framework.



Bishop Wellington Mulwa around 1975

Mulwa's successor, Ezekiel Kiprop Birech, had a background as an educator and his church vision was closely aligned with Help A Child's idea. His vision was that every village in Kenya should not only have a church, but also sufficient educational opportunities. He led the church for 16 years, which greatly helped its development into a strong organization. He was the opposite of Mulwa as a personality, but both stood firm for the same national church model. However, the A.I.C. remains vulnerable because it is particularly strongly represented in poorer areas. As a believer you think that

this is precisely the intention of the gospel. But then you calculate outside the social context that economic ties between the African churches and the Western aid organizations that strongly influence the functioning of the churches and their societies. From the A.I.C. there is an outflow to Pentecostalism, which is often more effective at reaching fundraising opportunities from the West and Korea. The Western aid organizations are afraid to work with churches like the A.I.C. and start NGOS that are more easily controlled.

In Kenya, Help A Child promoted the social relevance of the national church and thereby helped to create a building block for a sustainable society. Helping children was the main thing. Long live charity! But aid without ending up in a stable structure is not sustainable. Calvinism is based on the possibilities that God has created in people and also expresses itself about those in power among them. It defends the justice of humane social structures. Few in the Netherlands would have suspected this background of Help A Child and it is still largely unknown. For the Board of Help a Child, it was self-evident policy to work through national churches. And all this happened in Kenya, a country that was put together by outside forces and then socially exploited by the colonial power. A country that found itself in a kind of pressure cooker of integration and had to compete for the favors of donors. Now that in the 21st century Africa is finally in the spotlight due to the new phase in the geopolitical conflict of interest, this is an important aspect to hold on to. And then it can be safely said that Help a Child at an early stage played an innovative role for the indigenous society by working through A.I.C.

Is it really that important that churches become independent and focus on their own society? Does that contribute to the stability of a country? Important questions where the answer for a Westerner is not easy to find because we reason from societies that have been running for centuries. But also because development cooperation as a service provider of the Western governments or prosperous

donors (including the foreign evangelists) is not sufficiently based on national self-determination. The founders of Help a Child had thought about this.

What we see now in Kenya is an enormous diversity of churches and a government that is very aware of this. This played an important role in the elections in August 2022. Raila Odinga's camp suggested that the churches should be more strongly regulated. As a candidate he was always ahead in the polls, but in the end lost. It was explicitly stated that the remarks about restrictions on the freedom of churches did him no good. Even more remarkable is that the winning candidate, William Ruto, hails from the Africa Inland Church, the church that worked with Help A Child in the years after liberation from colonization.

This new president, William Ruto, has always had a bad press in the west. What is striking is that the new president does not come from the old elites in the central part of Kenya. His profile has always been that he came from the bottom up. However, the 55-year-old is now (2022) very rich and also in the picture for corruption. It is all the more striking that he won many votes in the area of the outgoing president, who supported the other candidate, Raila Odinga. This shows the dissatisfaction among voters and is a sign of a growing awareness in society. It is also striking that a party in parliament with many Muslims now supports Ruto. The chairman of the Evangelical Alliance in Kenya told the BBC that Ruto will allow for all sections of society in his government, and explicitly named Muslims.

And so the Africa Inland Church has a president drawn from its ranks for the second time. The first was Arap Moi. He is even more notorious in the West than Ruto, but it is striking that when Moi was defeated in an election, he was willing to accept the result. In this respect he compares favorably with other aged rulers. In any case, Moi has brought stability to Kenya for nearly 25 years, in a

context we described above of a country that is not yet a unity. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe, Moi had to cope with Western pressure for multi-party democracy. Throughout Africa this leads to problems to this day. But Moi was particularly blamed, perhaps because he was so honest to explicitly resist. Moi was primarily driven by the need for stability. He took office when President Kenyatta died in 1978. But he, like Bishop Mulwa, did not come from a dominant ethnic groups. When shortly after the death of Kenyatta, two Kenyan politicians attended a meeting of the U.N. in Geneva, they discussed among themselves who would become president in the next election. They came from the central and dominant part of Kenya and discussed various candidates from their ethnic group. Suddenly it dawned on them that it might be Moi who would take office after election. This anecdote makes clear the tensions that Moi had to deal with. Anyone who reads critical comments about him would do well to see whether this context and the time frame with which this president had to deal with are taken into account.

Like Ruto, Moi had started as a shepherd boy. In a gathering in the Pokot area around 1980, he addressed the nomadic culture of the tribe by highlighting a boy in school uniform and a boy in shepherd's clothing. He made it crystal clear: youth should go to school instead of tending sheep. This method of presenting will anger many Westerners. But the methodology is much milder than how rulers in Europe in the past used to deal with tribal practices.

In April 1994 I attended a lunch at Moi's home with half a dozen leaders of the Africa Inland Church. The brothers were especially busy with financial requests to the president, but Moi urged them to use the freedom they had in relation to what was happening in Somalia at the time. This was wise advice. Somalia has been in civil war since 1991. In October 1993, the corpses of American soldiers were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. In Somalia, little has changed since then.

Another notable member of the Africa Inland Church is Lieutenant General Lazarus Sumbeiywo, former commander of the army. Kenya appointed him as peace negotiator on behalf of the country

during the civil war in Sudan. Sumbeiywo is seen as the architect of the so-called Machakos protocol in July 2002. It cracks very hard notes about South Sudan's right to self-determination and separation between religion and state. This is the prelude to the eventual separation of South Sudan from the north, a unique result in the context described above of national borders determined by the west in the 19th century. The emergence of South Sudan has been called “an important breakthrough in the history of the continent of Africa”. Incidentally, Sumbeiywo combined his work as a peace negotiator with membership of the board of Scott Theological College of the A.I.C. in Machakos, including a period as chairman.

Kenya is an open society and the Muslim community is well integrated. The A.I.C. is a branch that is represented throughout the country, especially in the poorer areas. She embodies a piece of unity in diversity that is necessary for peace in a country. It has been called a people’s church. It is a national Bible-believing evangelical church, with no apparent ties abroad. And it is more democratic than the Catholic and Anglican Churches. It has a structure in which the local church is at the base and has influence through district and regional assemblies. The synod (“Baraza Kuu”) meets three times a year. The pastors are trained within A.I.C. itself.

In terms of substantive convictions, the church is more stable than the Pentecostal groups where the prosperity gospel is dominant, both in the indigenous and more Western-oriented variants. As in the West, the Pentecostal groups are winning. Many members are originally from the A.I.C. None of these groups has such a wide national spread as the A.I.C. The church is also an alternative to indigenous religious movements, which are often inspired by Christianity.

Indicating the social importance of the Africa Inland Church was the course of events with the installation of a new bishop in 2021. At the confirmation service, the president, the Catholic Uhuru

Kenyatta, the vice president and also the leadership of the opposition addresses the gathering. The service was broadcast live. Uhuru Kenyatta empathetically addressed the new bishop: “You are filling some very big shoes.” This meeting shows how important the A.I.C. is. It is also good to remember that a similar structure cannot be found in many other countries. I am referring to an evangelical church with national spread and a democratic structure, a stable biblical message and no clear ties with Western denominations. It is the church that Bishop Wellington Mulwa and his friend Arap Moi, both from different but poor regions have forged into a unity. A church that is not fashionable, but that pays attention to biblically trained offices. A church that received help in word and prayer from friends in the Netherlands.

We must conclude that there is a huge opportunity here. The gospel not only changes people but also societies. The gospel starts from the bottom up. Africa is not poor, it is different and it will be leading in the future. This is not a sweet story or a scientifically fully approachable thought. It's more a spiritual, the music that originally came from Africa and helped move the world a little bit further. In the 1960s, when Help A Child emerged, it was about education. Now it's much more about equality. Africa does not need help; the world needs Africa. The continent with many talents. To paraphrase Abraham Kuyper about the Netherlands, it could be said that if the world is Samson, Africa is his hair.

See also: The Transition from the Africa Inland Mission to the Africa Inland Church in Kenya, 1939 – 1975, F. Lionel Young III