

**Ethiopia Mission Network Conference**  
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**Communications**

**Background and History** – Yonas Yigezu

**Some History on communications in the early years**

Methods of communication in the early years of our shared ministries were totally dependent on ordinary mailing systems—sometimes express mailing systems were used but on those days express mail itself took nearly two weeks to reach the addressee. Ordinary ones normally took two to three weeks. Sometimes telephone calls were used but rarely successful because in those days automatic or digital telephone systems did not exist. This, of course, improved in some synods such as IBS beginning from early 90s, after the introduction of digital telephone systems. Later, this opportunity was also available to places like Gambella and Danbi Dollo. SWBS is still struggling.

Telephone call to USA from Ethiopia was and still is very expensive —less expensive to call from the States. But the problem that continues to exist is poor reception or bad connectivity. In the early days of our relationships, people responded in a more responsible and quicker way than at present time. Why??

At present time, although electronic mailing ( e-mail) is widely used, for some reasons, people in Ethiopia use them less efficiently. The problem is that we are good at checking our e-mails but too slow to respond—immediate response is not so much a case in our culture. Such slowness emerges mostly from the fear of risk-taking or inability to make decisions as quickly as one should do. The church hierarchy in decision-making is the main impeding factor. People at the Lower hierarchy fear to make decisions until the one at the higher level of the hierarchy (the boss) is consulted. For instance, at synod level, synod department directors would have to seek president's endorsement before they respond to external communications (even though they have the right to do without endorsement).

Cultural shift is another reason for inefficient communication. In the past letter writing was a standard means of communication, but these days e-mailing is becoming taking precedence over the letter-writing culture. Often times failure in the Internet or telephone systems are mentioned as an excuse for failing to respond to communication from the other end. Moreover, the current shift of communication system from cultural to the electronic one tends to create dependency on those who have the skills. In some synods, synod presidents or department directors do not have the skills in electronics and have to go at the pace of those who have the skill.

### **Possible Solutions for Improvement**

Such redundancies could be cleared in a variety of ways. Direct communication with concerned department at synod level will help improve communication irregularities. Presidents are too busy to attend to every communication. My experience is that, from partners side, people seem to be more comfortable with presidents than with department leaders. But the fact is that most of the works are done at department level—particularly, following the recent policy decision that limits presidents' involvement in administrative issues president's role in communication is tending to be less critical than before.

Caution has to be taken in regard to congregation to congregation relationships. I have personally observed that in the congregation to congregation relationships, Synod offices are at times being bypassed. Bypassing is okay for Presbyterian congregations in PC-USA but EECMY does not allow it as a matter of concern for denominational unity.

Moreover, I would also suggest that we have to continue using the Fax. It still stands vitally useful and efficient. Technology itself sometimes denies us its services. There are times when the Internet is down or phone lines are disconnected for an extended period of time. In such cases, one has to try other options.

I would also suggest communication with synods could be done through BSCO when direct connection with e-mail, fax or telephone is impossible (thus, the message can be passed to the concerned synod) Of course, BSCO itself sometimes suffers connection problems; but given that we are in Addis Ababa, solutions at a closer distance, that in regional towns.

### **Making decisions about programs and or projects**

Project/program proposals are normally initiated locally ( at congregation or presbytery level) and then passed on to the concerned synod department for screening and adjustment. After making the needed adjustments the concerned synod department director refers it to the Synod Management team, with a proposal regarding funding and implementation of the program. Synod management team endorses the project and authorizes the concerned department director to send it over to potential donors. Here is where Americans find it difficult—as working directly with a congregation or presbytery is easier. Here in Ethiopia, constitutionally, congregations and presbyteries do not have an unlimited autonomy. Thus, only a program or project request that has an official endorsement by any of the synod officials is legally acceptable. In this connection, it might be useful to also talk about fund transfer procedures. Any partner grant or program fund has to pass

through synod accounting system. There were in the past some instances of violating this principle.

### **Regarding Funds Transfers**

In regard to fund transfer—please underline that an advice letter that states designation of the fund has to follow. We have had some problems in this regard where partners make wire transfers and fail to write letter of notification or send or e-mail in relation to the transfer.

### **Further Development for Better Communications**

For further development of communications, I would suggest that training should be given a priority—a comprehensive training along with practical demonstration. One of the areas of training could be “ Reporting”. Ethiopians are good at telling what is being done but less efficient in reporting the impact that whatever is done makes on people’s life ( for instance ,success stories may need to be shared with partners).

Secondly, training is needed in the usage of modern communication technologies. Moreover, synods might need improved technologies even among the modern ones—for instance wireless network, SDL etc. English is another problem in Ethiopia. Communicating in English is like going up hill—one can walk up a hill but with minimal speed and with a lot of straining. In using English language, people have to use so much of their time even for a short letter. In some synods that is not so much a problem but some have to struggle a bit. Website development is something that we have to consider to have for all of our synods and units.