

## Regional and national communication offices in Africa

# How Can They Work?

*By Michel Philippart*

Preparing our agenda for the year 2000, we at CAMECO appreciated it very much that we would have the opportunity to attend the AECAWA, the AMECEA and the IMBISA Social Communication meetings in regions where we were not present for some time. For us, meetings and seminars are often an excellent way to learn more about the actual situation of communication in the different continents and to meet many of our partners at the same time. Nevertheless, looking back at this year, we have to admit that we haven't been very successful in our selection of conferences. Only the first meeting took place, but with very few in attendance: of the five countries only Nigeria was present, and the two other meetings were cancelled just a few weeks before the proposed dates. Reflecting among ourselves and with those responsible in the different regions, the question came to mind in which sense the present situation of the regional communication offices (and correspondingly the national ones as well) in Africa is reflected in the present difficulty of realising regional meetings. Therefore we would like to take this opportunity to share some ideas and questions on the aims and activities of these offices, and hopefully facilitate some discussion on how they could fulfil their important role in today's Church communication.

### **Who knows about the tasks of communication offices?**

Over the years, at world and African levels, many Church documents have been produced on communication, most of them dealing explicitly with the communication offices at the various levels.<sup>1</sup> Many ideas and concepts have been put on paper and distributed, but are these documents known? Are they read for the purpose of monitoring and improving our work? Or do they stay on the shelves?

There is no doubt that we have all the required guidelines of highly clear profiles for these offices to hand. For instance, in 1979, the then future AMECEA Communication Co-ordinator, Fr. Ladislaus Mosha worked out a document<sup>2</sup> in which he was summarising the objectives and goals of the regional communication offices as follows:

- a) "to provide means of contact and central meeting point for the apostolic and professional activities of Catholics in the field of radio, TV and other allied mass media and audio-visual means of communication which have the evangelisation of man and his development as their objective;
- b) to arouse collaboration among its members and organisations and also among other individuals working at national, continental and world-wide levels; to initiate and foster an understanding

and co-operation by means of study sessions, conferences, lectures, workshops, publications and through an exchange of information, programmes and research materials;

c) to represent the interests of its members at international level; to establish contact with authorised and private organisations which share common goals or are interested in the use of mass media for evangelisation and development purposes;

d) to give within its own sphere, help to dioceses or institutions within dioceses, in the training of personnel by organising and co-ordinating workshops and training programmes;

e) to promote research in all areas connected with radio, TV and other mass media and sometimes newspapers;

f) to collaborate with institutions of similar aims belonging to the Christian Churches of other denominations."

And these objectives haven't changed principally in the meantime. Thus, regional communication officers have a clear programme to fulfil. The focus points of their tasks are co-ordination, promotion and monitoring.

Of course, these general guidelines have to be translated into a concrete plan of action, and require the approval and strong support of the corresponding authorities, like e.g. the national or regional general secretary and the bishops' commissions in charge.

### A clear job description

Although the objectives seem to be clear, those nominated to put them into practice often do not know what to do. We at CAMECO's Africa Desk are often questioned by newly appointed communication officers, at all levels, about their job: "What do we have to do in this position?" In many cases, people without media experience or with very little qualification in the field are appointed only equipped with their own goodwill and their interest in communication. And on the other side, those who nominate them, don't provide them with a clear job description as their own vision of the communication office is quite vague.

### Find the right person: Qualification and continuity

To be able to fulfil the tasks of a national or regional communication office, it is necessary to look carefully for qualified and experienced "professionals". It is not enough to have someone holding the seat, taking care of the correspondence and the telephone calls... We need someone with knowledge of the media, well-aware of what is going on in today's communication world, well known and recognised by his/her fellow communicators, someone with a vision of the Church and her way of handling the media, capable of motivating others and fostering collaboration among them and – last but not least – able to manage and head a department.

The role of the national and regional communication officers is a hard and demanding one, but today in Africa, there are highly qualified and experienced communicators in many countries and places, lay people as well as religious and priests. There are many with high academic degrees in communication or with long and profound experience in the media field. So it should not be too difficult to find the right candidates! Sometimes, however, priests and religious who

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are well trained and experienced are not involved in communication activities anymore, but have, after only a few years, been appointed rectors of seminaries, parish priests, superiors or whatever. Are dioceses and national Bishops' Conferences prepared to make them available for these important jobs, at least for a certain period of time? On the other side, is the Church disposed to offer competent and committed lay people a just salary in order to attract the right professionals for those positions and to keep them in the job? Do we offer both the religious and lay people appointed to that kind of position adequate working conditions and facilities?

### **Adequate working conditions**

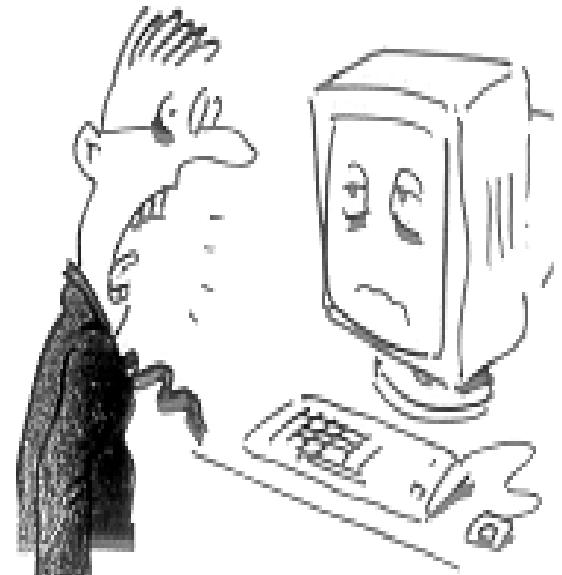
Let's suppose that the right person is appointed. Fine! However, in order that they may do the job they are supposed to do, some additional prerequisites should be taken into account:

**Minimum office facilities:** In order to cope with the daily tasks a communication officer needs some infrastructure, including an appropriate office and basic equipment, e.g. a computer, telephone line and Internet access, some communication equipment (radio and TV receiver, a photo camera, etc) as well as easy access to duplicating and office facilities (fax for instance); some of these facilities can be shared with other departments and offices according to the local circumstances.

**Financial provisions and autonomy in management:** We are talking about "senior officers" supposed to work out and conduct programmes and plans of action which have to be discussed with those involved in Church media activities and screened by the bishops in charge and the Commission for Social Communication. This means that the preparation and realisation of these plans and programmes require funds which have to be secured mainly through local resources (as part of the overall budget of the General Secretariat, but also from funds collected during Communication Sunday e.g., a part of the collection should be attributed to national and regional offices) and in part possibly also through some international sponsorship. Accordingly, a complete and realistic budget, with a balanced breakdown of expenses and income has to be prepared and submitted. This annual budget must be fully justified by the plan of action. The time when subsidies were granted as a lump sum for operational costs is nearly over now, and (local as well as foreign) possible sponsors demand more responsibility concerning accountability, efficiency and concrete results. Consequently, the communication officer has to be fully responsible in the financial management of the department: we know of quite a number of cases, even at national and regional level, where the "responsible" does not know how much money is in the department bank account and must even ask for every small amount from the "general administration"!

### **Communication offices – a test for the Church?**

The communication structures within the African Church – and this is true of other continents too and also outside the Church – must definitively prove their capacity to be vivid, vibrant and creative bodies, but at the same time reliable and accountable ones. This requires primarily qualified and competent people, dedicated to their jobs, but who, at the same time receive moral support and adequate facilities from their direct authorities and the beneficiaries of their actions, as well as from donors.



Source: 2000 PC+ Co

Most Church authorities don't doubt the importance of communications within the Church as well as with all those we are living with in our societies and we would like to communicate the Good News. To fulfil this mission, is a daily challenge for all of us – and the communication officers are supposed to be at the service of all those who accept this challenge. Therefore, the key of success, we believe, the performance and relevance of their visions and actions, remains a responsibility of all of us. And communication offices deserve and need the support of the local Church.

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<sup>1</sup> We can of course mention here the Pontifical documents like "Inter Mirifica" (1963), "Communio and Progressio" (1971), "Aetatis Novae" (1992). There are also others relevant ones like the "Criteria for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Cooperation in communication" (1989), the "Guide to the Training of Future Priests Concerning the Instruments of Social Communication" (1986), the "Instruction on Some Aspects of the Use of the Instruments of Social Communication on Promoting the Doctrine of Faith" (1992). There are some books which include those documents and others: "Church & Social Communication. Basic documents", introduced and edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, Svd, Logos Publications, Manila, 1993, 339 pages; "The African Church in the Communications Era", edited by Michel Philippart, published by St. Paul Publications-Africa now Paulines Publications Africa/ Nairobi, 1992, 160 p. In French, we could mention the two volumes edited by P. Aldo Falconi: "L'Eglise proclame" and "L'Eglise intervient", Médiaspaul, Kinshasa, 1993 and 1995. In the years 1988, 1990 and 1991, CAMECO already produced a few articles on the same issue in our newsletter which at that time was called the "CAMECO Information Bulletin".

<sup>2</sup> Ladislaus Mosha, "A plan for the Evaluation of AMECEA Communication Activities in Eastern Africa: Structure, Planning and Efficiency", Stanford University, June 1979, 34 pages.

Source:2000 PC + Co



***Happy New Year! Próspero Año Nuevo! Bonne Année!***

***We wish all our readers a fruitful start into the New Millennium and want to thank you for the understanding and support we received during the past year! We are looking forward to a further fruitful collaboration.***      ***The CAMECO-Team***