

ELCM Community Radio during War-Time Liberia:

For Peace and Justice

By Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis, Monrovia

"The genius of humankind, especially in our times, has produced marvellous technical inventions from creation, with God's help. Mother Church is particularly interested in those which directly touch the human spirit and which have opened up new avenues of easy communication of all kinds of news, ideas and directives. Chief among them are those methods of communication which by their nature can reach and influence not just single individuals but the very masses and even the whole of human society. These are the press, the cinema, radio, television and others of like nature. These can rightly be called the means of social communication."

"Mother Church knows that if these means are properly used they can be of considerable benefit to humanity. They contribute greatly to relaxation, the enrichment of peoples' minds and the spread and consolidation of the kingdom of God." (Inter Mirifica I.)

"At the dawn of a new era, a vast expansion of human communications is profoundly influencing culture everywhere. Revolutionary technological changes are only part of what is happening. Nowhere today are people untouched by the impact of the media upon religions and moral attitudes, political and social systems, and education." (Aetatis Novae I.)



Dr. Michael Kpakala Francis was ordained Archbishop of Monrovia in 1981. He is also President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Liberia and Executive Member of the Liberian Council of Churches and the Inter-Faith Council of Liberia.

Convinced of the necessity, urgency and needs of communicating God's word and the truth — in faith we established the ELCM Community Radio Station in Monrovia in 1981. It was a year after the bloody coup of 1980. We had tried to get the necessary license from the civilian government before the coup of 1980 but we were not successful. There was already a powerful fundamentalist radio station.

It was the military government that granted us the license and the vice-head of state who opened the station on March 8, 1981.

In 1978, the Archdiocese of Monrovia applied to the government of Liberia for a license to operate a radio station. Although there were two radio stations in the country, one the government's

ELBC and the other, a religious station ELWA, the government did not give us the license but used delaying tactics – why, I don't know.

In April 1980, there was a bloody coup and the civilian government was overthrown. A military junta took its place. In September of 1980, we again applied to the government showing our previous application. We were granted the license. With the help of the SMA Fathers in the USA, we purchased an FM station and established ELCM Community Radio, the first Catholic radio station in West Africa, if not in the whole of Africa. It is ironic that a military government was the one to grant the license for operation.

ELCM COMMUNITY RADIO STATION: 1981-1996.

There were three phases in the operation of ELCM Community Radio:

- a) 1981 - 85: Military Regime
- b) 1986 - 89: Civilian Government
- c) 1990 - 96: Civil Crisis

1981 - 85 Military Junta: The People's Redemption Council (PRC)

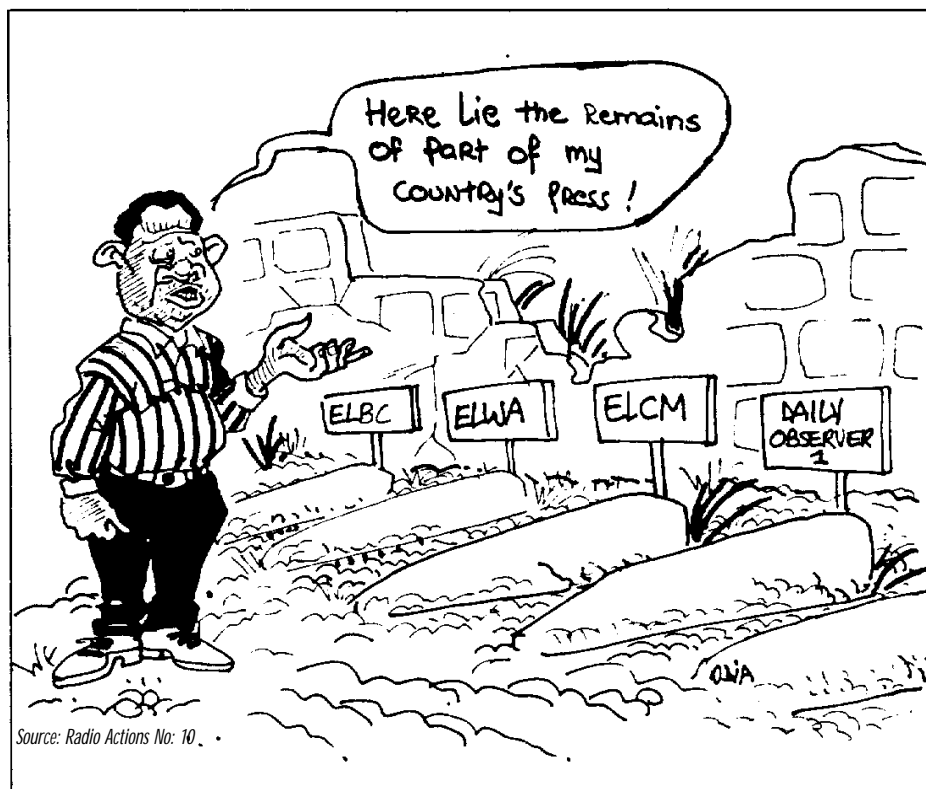
At the beginning of our operation as a community radio the government was favourable to this new station in that there was no molesting or curtailing of our freedom to broadcast the truth in all its forms and dimensions. As the government became repressive and as we were the only radio station that addressed itself not only to religious matters but especially to the social evils that existed, we gradually became targets of the Ministers of Information and Telecommunication. During the election campaign of 1985, I was called several times by the Head of State to be warned that our station was one of opposition. This became serious when we interviewed leaders of the opposition concerning the rigged elections. We explained our situation and requested that if the military government found anything we broadcasted to be contrary to the facts they may take us to court and we would have our day there. They threatened that our license would be withdrawn but we remained undaunted, for we believed we were doing and saying the right things.

Though the government threatened us they never attacked the station or closed it down.

1986 - 1989 Civilian Government

In 1989 there were elections followed by protest as they were openly rigged. Mr. Doe, the military junta leader was "elected", with everyone admitting that the elections were rigged. Two weeks after these rigged elections there was an invasion by Liberian dissidents to overthrow Mr. Doe which he suppressed violently resulting in the loss of thousands of lives. From 1986 - 1990 the regime violated all aspects of human rights, Liberia was virtually a police state. ELCM Community Radio had to address the questions posed and give answers in these years of state terrorism. Of course it became the target of the government but it forged on regardless of the consequences – preaching peace, reconciliation, justice and fair play.

In February 1989 I issued a pastoral letter on human rights condemning in clear and precise



forms what was happening in Liberia and proposing remedies. I read the pastoral letter on the radio programme, as I am accustomed to doing. The government was angry but could not legally close the radio station. A few months later – June 1989 – it summoned up the courage to shut us down due to, as they put it, subversion. We told our lawyer to sue the government but he was afraid and delayed. ELCM Community Radio was closed, as the late President Doe said, forever.

In March 1990, when the rebels came from the north to Monrovia to unseat Mr. Doe's government, he lifted the ban on ELCM and we were told we could operate again. We wisely refused to do so. In fact, as the civil war came nearer to Monrovia we disabled the station so that no faction, be it governmental or any of the then two rebel factions would take it over, as surely one of them would attempt. This was a wise move.

1990 - 1996 Civil Crisis

The station was damaged during the fight in Monrovia in 1990. In late 1991, when the rebels had been driven from Monrovia, we purchased a new FM Transmitter and were back on the air – preaching peace, reconciliation and educating the people about their rights and responsibilities – condemning in the process the atrocities being perpetuated by the warring factions.

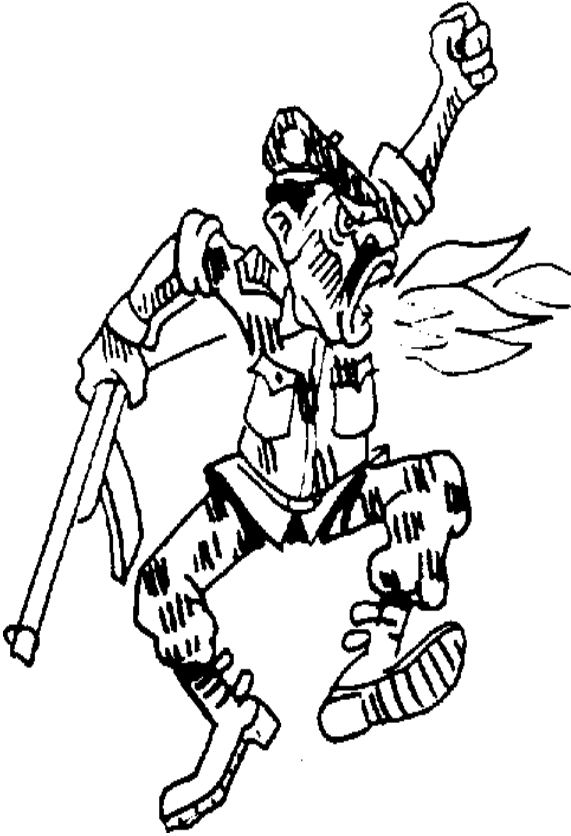
On April 6th, 1999 fighting broke out in Monrovia and on the 12th of April 1996, ELCM Community Radio was burnt down to the ground by the so-called "government" troops – two of the warring factions. The reasons were obvious: ELCM Community Radio Station was against the violation of human rights and was preaching peace, reconciliation, etc.

1997 - 1999 Civilian Government

Undaunted, we changed the name of our station from ELCM Community Radio to Radio Veritas and were on the air just before the elections of 1997 – it was in June in a new location and with the new name, Radio Veritas, that we continued our mission – interrupted for a year – to educate our people on peace, reconciliation, reconstruction and respect for the fundamental rights of our people. With an FM and SW transmitter we are doing just this. As with all the former governments we have also had problems with the present one but we are continuing the evangelization of our people. There are now good positive relations between Radio Veritas and the government – the Ministers of Information and Telecommunications.

EVALUATION OF OUR RADIO APOSTOLATE:

1. Despite our limited resources, we continue to be an instrument of reconciliation and an educator of our people on their rights and obligations. From the latest independent survey, 80%



of radio listeners tune in to Radio Veritas.

2. During the war and now, we have continued advocating reconciliation dialogue and peace. The government and the people know we have been consistent in this and that we will continue. When all independent electronic media during the heat of the war was closed, we rose up and continued our electronic apostolate. We have, according to an independent assessment, done tremendous work for the peace process.

3. We have had very dangerous moments and

difficult times but by trusting in God and our commitment to be the voice of the voiceless we continued to be on the air.

Our radio apostolate was and is the most valuable contribution to the peace process and reconciliation in Liberia. Ours is a radio trusted by the generality of our people. The media – in this particular case the electronic media – has played a tremendous part in bringing us to where we are and in spite of the difficulties, threats and obstacles that came our way – we have survived.

Even our critics have admitted that we were objective and had, as one supreme principle, the aim to bring the truth to all for it is in knowing the truth and accepting it that we can have true reconciliation. Through justice, peace and truth are brought to us.

CONCLUSION:

The civil crisis in Liberia from 1989 - 1997 showed us the tremendous impact the news media had and still has on our people for better or for worse. In our case it was for better and we are proud of our achievements despite the limited resources and the many serious and dangerous difficulties that came our way. We did our best and the country, it seems to me, is better for it.

The stopping of the fighting is just the beginning of the peace process and the healing of the deep-seated wounds. Every village and hamlet in Liberia has someone with a transistor radio and so, through the radio we continue to educate our people about the necessity of reconciliation, the need to respect the rights of others and the need to love each other - justice, peace and love.