



# A View from Liberia

John G. Innis

**T**he global Church is all about celebrating the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is about his “aliveness” in our midst in all circumstances. The hymn writer Will Thompson captured the “aliveness” of Christ in the first verse of his hymn, “Jesus Is All The World To Me.”

Jesus is all the world to me,  
My life, my joy, my all.  
He is my strength, from day to day,  
Without him I would fall.  
When I am sad, to him I go,  
No other one can cheer me so.  
When I am sad, he makes me glad.  
He’s my friend.

—Will Thompson  
(#469, *United Methodist Hymnal*)

On a bright spring morning earlier this year, the children of the Judith Craig Children’s Village in Monrovia, Liberia, gathered for a worship service. My wife Irene and I were honored guests at the Children’s Village. We had come to worship with the children and share with them greetings from fellow United Methodists around the world who were supporting them. The children sang this beautiful hymn without music and without instruments. They sang from their hearts, and in the song came a deep joy and thankfulness for life. Even though many of these children were orphaned during the civil war in Liberia, even though the war was not far from the doorsteps of the Village, their hearts and minds were overflowing with joy and thanks.

The laity and the clergy of Liberia also have this hope. For example, when I was away from home, I received a phone call from one of my pastors, the Rev. Albert Barchue, who happens to be the Principal at Camphor Mission outside Buchanan City, Grand Bassa County. He had just come to Monrovia by boat in search of food. I asked him, “How is life at Camphor Mission and Buchanan?” He responded in these words, “Bishop, we are being held hostage by the rebels. Everywhere we turn it is hard for us. We are like slaves in our homes. The rebels have taken everything from us. There is no way to find food to eat. Hunger is killing us. In fact, one of the teachers from Camphor, Eric Davis, has lost his life because of the lack of food and medication. But the good news, Bishop, is that the church is alive. Physically we are hungry, but spiritually we are filled. We worship God through Jesus Christ, morning, day and night, without fear, knowing that God is with us.”

The image of these children in song and Rev. Barchue’s hope-filled words speak of the vitality of the United Methodist Church in Liberia. The United Methodist Church is alive and growing in Liberia. The devastating civil war of the last 14 years has ruined the Liberian economy, torn families apart, devastated hospitals and clinics and virtually shut down schools for children and youth, but the people of Liberia remain thankful and faithful. Despite losing so much, even relatives and friends, United Methodists continue to praise God and depend on Christ as their only source of hope and comfort. In the words of the apostle Paul,

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Nothing! The fact remains that Jesus is our hope, the King of peace, the one who spoke gently, calmly, lovingly and caringly, to all who heard his voice and came unto him.

These comments illumine what it really means to be a global church. The United Methodist Church in Liberia has not been alone in the struggle. I have personally seen the global church at work to support Liberia. There are more than seven Annual Conferences, and many individuals, that are in partnership with Liberia. Many have written letters to Congress to support peace in Liberia, many have met with President Bush directly to advocate for Liberia, thousands of concerned people have responded to the UMCOR emergency appeal for Liberia. This global outpouring of concern is living out the image in First Corinthians of the church as the body of Christ, “...when one part of the body is hurting, we all hurt.”

But, there is more to the story. From my perspective in Liberia, there are many issues of injustice that the global United Methodist Church needs to address in order to become healthy.

Currently, Liberian Church leaders do not feel valued simply because the Liberian economy struggles compared to western countries. **Should the voice of Liberian Christians be less important because of economic poverty when their spiritual wealth is so great?** Is the global church really alive when pastors in Liberia do not earn a living wage? Many pastors, especially pastors in rural Liberia, earn less than \$2.00 a month, and District

Superintendents earn less than \$100 a month. Most Liberian pastors and lay workers do not have basic health care or any type of health insurance benefits. Retirement plans that do exist do not come close to providing adequate funds. How concerned is the global church about these issues of justice? I am pleased, however, that work has begun on these issues through a committee of the Council of Bishops, with the help of the General Agencies of the United Methodist Church.

One of the greatest struggles of the United Methodist Church in Liberia, as the case may be in other parts of Africa, is developing committed leaders for the church. It is a challenge when the global church invests in the training of Liberian church leaders in the United States and they choose not to return to Liberia to serve the church. What is the purpose of the training? Shouldn't the training empower us to return leaders to Liberia to go forth in making disciples? Where is our commitment? **How can the global church help Liberia retain its leaders?** How can we work with each other to faithfully serve the church in Liberia with our education through the universities and seminaries in the United States?

As the United Methodist Church in Liberia, there are many issues that we need to address ourselves. There are issues of accountability, respecting the process and the *Discipline* of the church. There are leaders within the church who would rather serve themselves than the broader good of the church. The church, through its leaders, must set an example for the people of Liberia. We must be faithful stewards in helping to rebuild war-ravaged Liberia. Our examples must assist in breaking the spirit of corruption and dependency. My office has begun to address this issue, but the global church needs to partner with us to move forward. The body of Christ is only healthy when all of the functioning parts are healthy. For example, one small step we have taken in Liberia to break the spirit of dependency is the establishment of the Liberia United Methodist Empowerment Foundation (LUMEF). Through this endowment we can work with our brothers and sisters globally to improve our financial foundation and support evangelism, education, health care, justice and children, youth, women's and young adult ministries in Liberia. This

implies that the United Methodist Church exists for the world to extend its love to all in times of war, hunger, poverty, injustice, and ignorance. This is why John Wesley said, "The world is my parish." Wesley's words were in direct response to Jesus' great commission, "Go ye into the world and make disciples of all nations"

To God be the glory for giving us gracious hearts, willing hands, and out-reaching love in working together to be disciples of Jesus Christ. □

**Editor's Note:**

UMCOR's Liberia Emergency Advance #150300. For information or to make donations, call 800-554-8538.



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