



America Through African Eyes

Peter Storey

The likeable young man on the flight to Johannesburg was anxious: "I'm not looking forward to handing in my passport when we arrive," he said. "In Kenya and Zanzibar the Immigration people were not very nice to me when they saw my nationality." The pity was that this student from the United States had come to volunteer with a South African non-profit working among the very poor. He should have felt welcome, and doubtless when he got to be among his hosts, he was warmly embraced, but not without this new anxiety about being American in the rest of the world.

In today's Africa individual Americans are welcomed when they seek to seriously engage with this continent and its people, but the United States as a political and economic entity is increasingly resented. How this could happen in the relatively brief period since September 11, 2001, when throughout Africa, people wept in solidarity with the pain of all Americans, is a tragedy, but not a mystery.

These past three years of deteriorating relationships with the rest of the world have been some of the most inept and insensitive in American history.

It was not always like this, especially within the fellowship of the church. I traveled to the United States regularly since 1966, seeking help in our struggle against apartheid in South Africa,

and United Methodists in the U.S. never failed us. You offered your prayers and your considerable support. You challenged us when our witness faltered. The story of your democracy was itself an inspiration, and your non-violent Civil Rights struggle spurred us to greater effort in ours. When your government

called Nelson Mandela a "Communist" and secretly supported the apartheid regime you stood firm and helped to change its mind. You gave shelter to our exiles and in the 1980s I recall sending a number of black students to United Methodist colleges that generously welcomed them so they could live in freedom. It changed their lives and I will always be grateful. I know first-hand that Americans are genuinely good people who look out for their neighbors and care deeply about others. My spouse and I have found friends here as close and precious as any we've ever known.

But it may be our turn to speak a word of challenge. Increasingly those of us in the developing world sense what it

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There is a myth, cherished by the majority of Americans, that their nation's foreign and economic policy is as moral and benign as its people. From Africa it is viewed differently. We experience

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the US-led “global economy” as a decidedly mixed blessing, often deeply biased against us. Many cultures beyond the shopping malls of America, while naturally envious of U.S. prosperity, wish that they could resist the destructive individualism, wasteful consumerism and MTV morals that come with it. There is also anger at America’s careless use of military force. Iraq, in particular, has become a wedge issue affecting the already fragile relations between Muslims and Christians in Africa.

Most Americans do not know these things because they live in a privileged ‘bubble,’ isolated from the real world by ignorance of both geography and history. The ‘bubble’ is like one-way glass with the rest of the world looking in, but few Americans able to look out. America’s media panders to this isolation, so the nation talks largely to itself and seldom hears what the developing world is thinking.

The insensitivity of some American Christians does not help. Africa is not simply a target for evangelism, but a source of wisdom and a partner in witness. Christianity is growing faster in Africa than anywhere, yet I seldom travel home without at least one group of zealous young U.S. proselytizers on the flight aiming to “bring the Gospel” to us. When I remind them that 80 per cent of Southern Africans are Christians, with millions of them belonging to churches established 200 years ago, they are undeterred. The impression they leave is that you’re not really a Christian until you’ve embraced their televangelism-style fundamentalism.

United Methodism is not entirely exempt from this critique. Africa University was established without consultation with indigenous Methodist Conferences in Southern Africa, who had nearly two centuries of experience administering such institutions. For some time, in spite of strenuous objections from those in whose Conference they are trespassing, Zimbabwean United Methodists have been launching UMC congregations

in South Africa, and appear determined to establish an Annual Conference here. Those of us in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, established here since 1805, wonder how American United Methodists would react if the British Conference, for instance, launched a few congregations in New York. Small wonder that when U.S. Methodists talk of being a ‘Global Church,’ the majority of world Methodist family asks the question, “How different is this from the global imperialism we experience in U.S. foreign policy?” They note that wherever U.S. Methodists have done missionary work, the churches they founded remain tied to American UMC apron strings, instead of becoming autonomous like those, for instance, born out of English Colonialism, and ask, “Who are the colonialists now?”

What is urgently needed is for American Christians to come out of their “bubble,” to discover and listen to their sisters and brothers in the developing world. A recent “Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope” through South Africa by a group of Duke University Divinity School students and staff was literally life-transforming for them as they visited with HIV/Aids sufferers, spent time with the homeless on Johannesburg’s streets and engaged with people pouring out their lives daily in the struggle against poverty, homelessness, hunger, unemployment, and violence. They also listened enthralled as Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu took on a leading government figure, reminding him firmly that the church was accountable only to God, and would hold Caesar accountable for his treatment of the very poor. “Why,” they asked, “cannot American church leaders make such a stand back home?”

Those of us who were part of the long church struggle against the powers in Southern Africa are also puzzled by the relative silence of the UMC in the American public square. This space seems to have been surrendered to right-wing fundamentalists who are really the religious face of power, and it needs to be won back. Before the United Methodist

Church can begin to reclaim the prophet’s mantle, however, it will have to ask itself to what degree it has bought into a civil religion that confuses the political and economic interests of the U.S. with God’s purposes for God’s world.

What might be some of the important issues addressed by a prophetic church in the U.S.? It seems to me that there are four priorities with which every UMC congregation ought to be wrestling—each one crucial to being the church in today’s America and each one having significant implications for the rest of the world:

The first is the issue of wealth, poverty and good news to the poor.

America’s long-term survival depends on how it relates to the poor of the earth. Unless the lesson of Zaccheus—that salvation only comes by sharing with the poor—is learned, there will be no world peace (Luke 19:9). Turning from an increasingly voracious consumerism to a more sustainable and world-friendly lifestyle is the only answer and until the church itself begins to live this biblical truth, it will not be able to proclaim it. This is an issue that calls every local church to study the Scriptures, asking: “What is Jesus saying about being rich when people are poor?”

The second great issue is that of flag and altar, God and Caesar.

In too many American churches, nationalism speaks louder than the gospel. A prophetic church will question the presence of Caesar’s flag in so many of God’s sanctuaries, because faith can be too easily confused with the “national interest” and become a false gospel. Instead of being so concerned about whether the word “God” is replaced in the Pledge of Allegiance, Christians should be much more worried about the Pledge of Allegiance replacing God at the center of their hearts. We are not being kind to our congregations when we avoid this issue. Unless Christians learn a higher loyalty than their patriot-

ism (Acts 5: 29-30), we are allowing them to practice idolatry.

The third issue is that of violence and peace making. One does not have to be a pacifist to see the limitations of even the strongest military power in the world. A prophetic church will repudiate the belief that you can save people by killing them, redeem a nation by destroying it, or bomb a country into democracy. It will do serious Bible study about why Jesus named peace-makers, not war-makers, the children of God (Matthew 5:9). It will listen “outside the bubble” to learn why U.S. policy is so deeply resented and what needs to change. It will demand that peacemaking become the nation’s priority.

The fourth issue is that of inclusion and exclusion. Human beings

are born with an addiction to division. We bolster our identity by rejecting those different from us. We’ve tried it variously with the poor, with slaves, with people of color, with women, and with people of different sexual orientation, bringing the same tired arguments to justify each campaign of exclusion. Nations do this too, with whoever we currently call our “enemy.” Fighting this addiction to division is the relentless hospitality of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:4-11). A prophetic church will urge this culture to welcome those in its midst who it has hurt and rejected so that it can learn how to be more open to those cultures and nations around the world who have suffered centuries of exclusion at the hands of the powerful.

Each of these issues calls the church to a more radical obedience to Jesus and wrestling with them may reveal where lack of obedience is binding its witness to this

great nation. For those of us living in developing countries, a new, unfettered determination by American members of the Methodist family to speak truth to their own powers will encourage us, reminding us again that we are not alone in the struggles we face in our own countries.



Peter Storey lives in Cape Town and is a former Bishop and national leader of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. He was deeply involved in the church’s anti-apartheid struggle and teaches courses on Church and

State for part of each year as Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke University Divinity School. He is the author of *With God in the Crucible* (Abingdon, 2002).

Two Responses to Peter Storey

The Rev. Paul Dirdak

Dr. Peter Storey’s principles have much to teach us even if many of us may differ with him on their specific application.

For instance, until all of God’s people in South Africa are members of churches, Zimbabwean United Methodists are hardly “trespassing” because the African Central Conference authorized a Provisional Annual Conference in South Africa—and that action came from Africans. But Storey’s principle is solid: mission is entirely incompatible with the taking of other people for granted.

While, as Storey writes, some evangelical practices fail to respect Africa’s strong church history, this is not typical of United Methodists. Every UM Advance project in Africa was proposed by an African bishop. Every UM missionary in Africa is serving at the request of an African bishop. Yet, there are places where we can do much better. For example, Africa University does need to embrace

the needs for higher education in long-serving schools in French-speaking African countries.

We can all benefit from Storey’s four priorities for mission in Africa by using them to evaluate our experiences and inform our future work. They resonate positively with concepts we are hearing from our new GBGM general secretary, the Rev. R. Randy Day. They are in keeping with our objectives in relief and development ministries.

Among the many successful programs of the General Board of Global Ministries is humanitarian demining in Mozambique. Our partner agency is the only entirely Mozambican demining company in that country. Because of our contract, it has doubled its mine clearance rate through the addition of machines and explosive-detecting dogs. We chose to engage in the project because success would shift a crucial humanitarian function directly and emphatically to an entirely indigenous, not to mention

exceptionally competent, new company.

Within UMCOR, a wide spectrum of AIDS, hospital, agriculture, business development, education, disaster response, troop demobilization and food distribution projects are under way in various African countries. All of them involve dedicated African church and community leaders, persons sincere in their request for our support and whose partnership we take quite seriously.

In everything we do, Storey would have us show preference for the poor, speak truth to established power, engage in peace making, and practice genuine inclusion—high goals which we have not reached, but to which we aspire.

The Rev. Paul Dirdak is the Deputy General Secretary for the United Methodist Committee On Relief, Health and Welfare Ministries and Mission Volunteers of the United Methodist Church. He also has management responsibility for the Africa Office of the General Board Of Global Ministries

Bishop F. Herbert Skeete

I appreciate the prophetic article by the Rev. Dr. Peter Storey. It adequately captures the over all state of Christianity in our world today. I realize he was writing for a U.S. publication so the UMC is an appropriate illustration; however, his message speaks to the whole Christian Church in the world, including Africa. Wesley pointed to the problem we face long ago in his sermon in 1789, "The causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity." He asked: "Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be!) that Christianity, true scriptural Christianity, has a tendency in process of time to undermine and destroy itself? For wherever true Christianity spreads it must cause diligence and frugality, which is the natural course of things must beget riches. And riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity." That is the regrettable disparity between the hope of Christianity and its actual witness. Yet, we must continue to press on, giving all we can.

The UMC has spoken to most of the issues raised by the Rev. Storey at General Conferences, Annual Conferences, through the Boards and Agencies, and the Council of Bishops. A quick scan of these statements clearly challenge the morality of our nation's foreign and economic policies. Perhaps, that may be the very reason why the President, refuses to meet with the Bishops and UMC leaders.

The challenges of Christianity in the world today are different from decades ago when churches and synagogues led the Civil Rights crusade. Today the voices of our churches raised for the poor in the ghettos and cities are muffled from foreign press by the expanding corporate greed, consumerism, and the control of media. Regrettably, these are often led by persons nurtured in our churches as Wesley so wisely saw even in 1789. But for the grace of God it would be worse. I have seen these forces of evil even in developing countries in Africa.

The Rev. Dr. Storey misses the mark on two points raised in the article. The first relates to the "territorial paranoia" I experienced among some persons in the Methodist Church South Africa (SA). None of the Methodist Bishops I met in South Africa or Zimbabwe saw the UMC conference in SA as a problem. They were all cooperative and ready to work together. Rev. Storey's article seems to imply that the

UMC conference in SA came out of a "global imperialism" crusade by UMC. Our UMC missions have existed in SA since 1922, started by laypersons, immigrant Methodist miners from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and other countries who came to work in SA. The Methodist Church there did not reach out to those poor black miners so they asked for pastors from their home churches. The presence of the UMC in SA is from neglect of mission opportunities. In the U.S. we live in partnership with AME, AMEZ, CME, and other Methodists. The Methodist Church of Korea has districts in the U.S., and former British Methodists from the Caribbean exist independently in the U.S. We have grown to appreciate a "Pan Methodist Relationship."

Finally, regarding Dr. Storey's comments about Africa University. I served as president of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM)—1984-88. As president, I presided at the early meetings of the planning committee for AU, which included several African educators who were active in government institutions in Africa. GBHEM extended invitations to many of the members of the World Methodist Council in Europe and Africa. At Geneva the response was generally "this is not in our pipeline and it could take up to ten years for us to commit." When the African UM Bishops and leaders received the report, they insisted that any delay was unacceptable. They all agreed to start as a UMC university and would welcome anyone at anytime after. Also, the only countries considered for the location of the University were those that had extended an invitation to the committee for consideration. At no time did we receive any objection from our conference in Zimbabwe. Instead, when we asked the Conference for 5 acres for the campus, the Zimbabwe Annual Conference gave the university 25 acres, and has remained very supportive to this day. It is not easy for one looking in from the outside to separate the policies of the U.S. government from the policies and positions of the UMC. Even UMC members in the US have difficulty. Every crusader who claims membership and goes out sponsored by persons or even local churches does not truly represent the prophetic ministry of the UMC. But, thank God we find comfort in the fact that the message of hope in Christ is more important than the nationality of the messenger. □

Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, (retired) served as Interim Bishop of Zimbabwe 2002-2003.

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