

AFRICA AND US

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Africa itself is like this issue of *Circuit Rider* about Africa—diverse, multi-faceted and inclusive of many perspectives. We could not possibly in one issue explore enough about Africa to give an adequate picture of the countries, the people, their struggles and their churches. But we can open up a few aspects of African life. Likewise, United Methodist pastors and churches cannot do everything possible and needed in response, but we can do many important things and both they and we can benefit.

I have had the opportunity to visit more than half of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa in the last quarter century. I still marvel at some of the experiences and learnings.

1 When the Word of God is preached in the churches, attention is rapt. They want to hear more about God and how God cares about them. Many Africans are as hungry for the Word as they are for food. Bishop Innis points to this reality also in these pages.

2 There is a small African middle-class in most African countries that have adequate provisions for each day. But for many more having the basics for life is day-to-day. In the city of Kinshasa in the Congo, I noticed people who had laid out a small dishtowel on the side of the road. On the towel were shelled peanuts, which they sold in small portions. Bishop Onema explained that a peanut vendor would take the earnings at the end of the day and buy peanuts to sell the next day. If there was any money left over, it would be used by the vendor for food (for the family) that evening. If there was nothing leftover, they would go hungry that night as they looked toward a better day tomorrow.

3 Hopelessness is indeed a constant companion for many in Africa, as Margaret Wheatley points out. But in a culture that highly values togetherness and community, it leads to transformation and new possibility. If we could let the Africans teach us about this, our lives would be transformed too.

4 The Christian church in Africa, as Cathy Robinson shows through her conversations with Philip Jenkins and Alister McGrath, is joyous, dynamic, and soul saving—in the way Methodism was in North America 150 to 200 years ago. Churches in the United States that get hooked-up with the African church seem to relearn what that looks like in this culture again too.

5 There are numerous ways for United Methodists to initiate that “hooking-up” with the life-source of African

Christianity. Pay attention especially to the insights of Rose-Tucker, Lutgen, Stahl, Skeete, Nkula, and Salley.

6 The needs of African churches are often very simple and basic—Bibles, hymnals, membership roll books, and the like. It is not unusual in churches in Mozambique for three or more families to share one Bible, passing it on each week to the next family. I found that more than half of the leaders (including pastors) of United Methodist churches in Nigeria do not have a Bible in Hausa, their native, heart language.

7 I learned in other African nations what the Bryant family learned in South Africa—Africans are not provincial or selfish. If North Americans are victims, Africans are victims too. Peter Storey, however, shows us the other side of the empathy and compassion of Africans: namely, the go-it-alone, elitist nature of Americans that Africans see in us.

8 Earlier this year, while I was in South Africa, I asked everybody I could about the HIV/AIDS crisis. It is much too taken-for-granted. Nobody knows how extensive infection is. Official figures say 40% of adults are infected.

It could be 50% higher or lower. Don Messer is most helpful on this worldwide crisis, particularly as it spins out-of-control in Africa.

Watch for the subtleties in what you read here. Perhaps our United Methodist task in this day in Africa is not mainly about what we do there. It has much to do with who we are in relation to power, how we use our place of “privilege,” and whether there is any place in our hearts for simple humility. It may be more about our learning from Africa about loving neighbor, living in community, sharing the wealth, and telling the story about One who gave it all away for them and for us. And as we relearn about these things, maybe they and we can create new possibilities for global mission. □



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