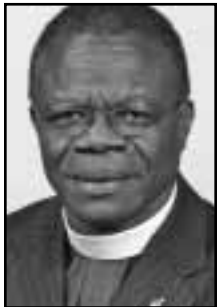


A View from Liberia

John Innis

The United Methodist Church is a global church with a global vision. Sharing the universal Great Commission, our purpose has been to “go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, and teach them to obey all things” Christ taught us. This is the message of salvation and this is the mission of a loving and forgiving God offering the human race, which can some times be devoid of meaning, hope and unmerited grace.



John Innis

Looking Back

Liberian history has seen its share of pain and suffering as a result of our civil war. There were times when we were unsure of the outcome of the bitter days and the painful nights. More than once, we felt like “the condemned prisoner” of the French existentialist Albert Camus’ character in “The Myth of Sisyphus” who was condemned by the gods to move a huge rock to the summit of the hill only for the rock to roll back down to the bottom of the hill, thereby forcing the “condemned prisoner” to resume the task all over again.

There were times in our civil crisis when we thought there was futility to our unending exercise. But then the global church, particularly as expressed through our connectional system, continued to make its presence felt in numerous ways, thus reminding us that the sacrifice of our Lord, Jesus Christ defeated a nihilistic and sinful world.

In this regard, the global dimension of our relationship leads to two questions: What are the challenges faced by American Methodists within this global context, and secondly, how can other United Methodists in Africa, Europe and Asia participate in this discussion?

This distinction is useful in the sense that it was through the

Western world and its unique cultural perspective that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, initially articulated in the context of a Judaistic and Hellenistic cultural tradition, was transmitted to other regions of the world, including Africa. I believe the Western Church faces several challenges in light of its primary role in propagating the gospel around the world in response to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

Challenges of the Western Church

First, there is the challenge of creating partnerships with the churches in Africa. The economic and scientific progress made by the West places the Western Church in a unique position of power and wealth. Also, the role of the Western Church, as the primary source of Christianity in Africa, makes it easy to see how a paternalistic and a patronizing relationship could persist in the global church. This disparate relationship can lead to inadequate emphasis placed on global conversation and communication, which could have adverse effects on evangelism and social transformation. The concept of a global church can give rise to the mistaken belief of a common cultural understanding of Christianity.

While Christ and what he stands for—faith, salvation, love and grace—mean the same thing to Christians, yet in some parts of Africa, as Francis Kabasele noted, we may go beyond the concept of Christ being a son and view him also as an ancestor and elder brother, based on the “parallel between Jesus and Adam in Christian preaching, (which) established the image and suggestion of the Ancestor on the figure of Christ even more solidly.”

Furthermore, the idea of the gospel of salvation and redemption for many in the West is viewed as applicable to heaven and the afterlife, but for many Africans, while salvation and redemption are relevant for heaven and the afterlife, it is important to realize that the faith of the African is also for redemption and

salvation from “drought, injustice, dictatorship, corruption, famine and so on,” as Cece Kolie puts it. Kolie reminds us that the African Christian seeks power not only for healing, but for overcoming “the fundamental problematic of the black person – a dominated person, the victim of exploitation and torture, racism and contempt on the part of the established powers.” We invite the Western Church to recognize these concerns as legitimate.

Another challenge the Western Church faces is the struggle for representation and participation in global gatherings, specifically the General Conference. There is discussion now to reduce this to 500 or 600. For example, it has, since 1784, predetermined that delegates to the General Conference should not exceed 1,000. Since then, the Church has become more global, but the limitation placed on the number of delegates may result in a disproportionate allocation of representation to some parts of the global church.

A third challenge the Western Church has to deal with is the strong influence Western governments have on them. When Western governments diminish the strategic value of Africa and neglect the Third World, Western churches tend to follow those positions. When states collapse and social unrest occur in Africa, the Western Church sometimes enters into dialogue with the African Christian establishment to gain sympathetic insight of the dilemma the Church in Africa faces. Unfortunately, this is where it stops because Western cultural stereotypes and prejudices, from which many Western churches, even the American Methodist Churches, have been unable to escape, have imposed constraints on the American Church’s ability to respond constructively to the needs and concerns of the global church. We encourage the American Church to support African Churches’ efforts toward stable societies and to encourage us and possibly participate in the attempts at conflict mediation and reconciliation.

A fourth challenge the Western Church has to address is how to facilitate the economic strength of the African Church to support clergy and provide decent retirement benefits. We are grateful that the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits has begun to look in this direction. The Pilot Project for Liberia is an example. We acknowledge the effort individuals and groups have made and are making towards this process in Liberia and other African countries. An organized effort will put the African Church in a position to care for the ministers who are making sacrifices, especially during times of social crisis and civil unrest.

Challenges of the African Church

I consider next some compelling ideas for the reorientation of the African Church. It is undeniable that the nature of assistance and the way it is constructed has contributed to deepening of the dependency relationship. Although well-intentioned to promote the growth of the Church in Africa, dependency has produced structures which have impaired the ability of the global church to take its own initiative on a range of issues such as planning for the future with a view to being self-sustaining. The African Church ought to plan strategies on the vital issue of empowerment and ways of achieving this through mutual cooperation and understanding.

Another issue for the African Church relates to the best practices for worship. Graduates from our theological seminaries take a largely traditional approach with liturgies and unchanging structures. This universalist approach to worship has failed to take into account cultural and other differences, which call for a variety of approaches to worship. As Rick Warren rightly observed, “many forms of praise are mentioned in the Bible, among them, confessing, singing, shouting, dancing, making a

joyful noise, testifying, playing musical instruments and raising hands. The best style of worship is the one that most authentically represents your love for God based on the background and personality God gave you.” Forcing a particular society to accept a style of worship that the people consider culturally unsuitable and unsatisfying may constitute a stumbling block not only to evangelism, but “to worshipping God in spirit and in truth.” Pentecostal and Christian churches with African roots are in the forefront of this spiritual renewal that has taken Africa by storm. The adaptation of devotional methods to cultural conditions is the catalyst that has produced this change. It is not uncommon these days to find members from mainline denominations holding dual membership in these fast-growing mega churches largely because they find their form of worship infinitely more satisfying.

Further research on this issue is obviously needed so that worship services are not only thoughtful, but do not lose their focus on the gospel of redemption. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 14, “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.” Satisfying these conditions in the light of cultural sensibilities constitutes a major challenge. Rick Warren concludes that “God is not pleased with thoughtless singing of hymns, perfunctory praying of cliches, or careless exclamations of ‘Praise the Lord,’ because we can’t think of anything else to say at that moment. If worship is mindless, it is meaningless.” Finding the proper balance is key to an appropriate style of worship.

Closely related to the issue of worship style is the need for seminaries in Africa to maintain a curriculum that reflects the global Christian traditions, but definitely includes courses that take into consideration matters that affect African societies. Including courses on understanding healing, the nature of power, the world views of many traditional Africans, the dynamics of African worship are some ways the African Church, through the seminaries, can properly prepare African ministers to become effective among Africans.

Finally, it is imperative that the African Church face up to the challenges of contemporary societies. In the face of militant Islamic threats, many African countries with large Muslim populations are potential flash points in the future. The Church’s role in addressing this problem through the creation of interfaith communities is certainly urgent. **The fundamentalist disposition of some denominations that is dismissive of this threat is worrisome indeed because Al Qaeda and other militant bodies are scouting around Africa to recruit marginalized and discontented youth into their ranks. Designing programs now that promote peaceful co-existence among sectarian and ethnic groups is certainly consistent with the social principles of Methodism.**

A vision of a global church is one that recognizes the universal nature of the Gospel yet with culturally appropriate expressions of that same Gospel. Despite the global crisis of wars, rumours of wars, poverty, epidemics and social unrest, the global Church must continuously give hope and renew the faith of each new generation. In order to maintain this global vision, the Church in the West has to come to terms with core challenges. In the same way, the Church in Africa has challenges it has to confront as well. If we don’t avoid these challenges, we will make the Church stronger and remain faithful to the Great Commission and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

To God be the Glory! □

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