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The Future Reach of Africa's Missionary Pastors

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The definition of missionary is broadly defined as those who are sent by God to minister in a culture unlike their own. This definition includes a Western missionary going into an African culture as well as an African missionary going into an American culture. The idea of missionary can also include an African pastor going into an area of another language group or with distinct cultural differences. The phrase “missionary pastor” is understood here to mean someone who is in a God-called ministry to others not like one's self while serving in a foreign culture. There is now a global need for missionary pastors within the holiness tradition.

Tradition is not only the practice of looking backward, but also of looking forward. Scriptural holiness is rooted in the 19th century holiness movement in the United States and the even older British roots of evangelical Methodism. So what does the future hold for the spreading of scriptural holiness as taught by European and American missionaries in the diverse lands of Africa? The answer to this question is not meant to provide fodder for an intellectual symposium, but as a forum for focusing the future reach of the Good News in its fullest hope for sinful humanity—hearts and lives set free and made pure.

Teaching the holiness tradition in Africa needs to ask at least two important questions: What theological traditions, Christian and non-Christian, are already present on this continent? And, how does one go about tradition-building anyway? In the recent past, building the holiness tradition meant simply to transplant ideas from the United States or Europe into African soil and hope that it would take root.

In her 1998 fiction novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver described how an American missionary to Africa brought vegetable seeds for planting a garden to provide food for his family. The plants took root, grew, and blossomed. However, the blossoms withered and fell off the

plant, producing no fruit. Frustrated, he finally listened to the advice of a local African woman. She told him the native insects did not pollinate the foreign plants, no matter how brilliantly they blossomed. A similar scenario could play out on this continent regarding the teaching of scriptural holiness. Will this rich theological tradition blossom beautifully, but wither away producing no real or lasting fruit?

The missionary described by Kingsolver had planned ahead but without insight into the place he was going. He used his past experiences with gardening and farming. What his plans left out, however, were the insights from African farmers needed to make garden seeds bear fruit. What insights should be at the forefront of theological education to insure the fruition of the great truth of scriptural holiness on the African continent? Missionary pastors can find these insights through improved theological education. Theological education can be enhanced in at least three areas: to reach new peoples through critical contextualization, to offer more educational depth and breadth, and, most importantly, to look to the future with the hope of a missionary pastor.

Theological education for missionary pastors needs an emphasis in critical contextualization to help them understand and evaluate the context in which they live and minister. The older approach, known simply as “contextualization”, at times, resulted in masking indigenous traditions with the transplanted forms of the new “missionary” religion. For example, in ancient Europe, the celebration of the Incarnation (Christmas) was tied to the pagan celebrations of winter’s arrival, e.g. Saturnalia and Yuletide. The missionary forms were lost over time, so that only the indigenous meanings remained and are now tied almost exclusively to commercial interests.

Critical contextualization, however, has four unique steps in the process of engaging cultures in which all of us minister (Hiebert et al, 1999). The first step encourages the Christian minister to make accurate observations of religious phenomenon within the host culture. A missionary pastor needs to ask honestly: What is going on in this culture? The second step is an objective analysis of what is observed: What does this practice mean for the host culture? Then, the cultural practices observed by the missionary pastor need to be evaluated according to the revelation of God’s Word. Further, reality tests need to be made that compare the host culture’s

practices to other cultural practices around the world. Step three asks: What are the implications of integrating this cultural practice according to the Scripture? And, why is there conflict or no conflict between this cultural practice and the rest of the world? Finally, the missionary pastors organize their ministries to bring about transformation in the lives of those within their host culture through interaction with the Gospel. This last step asks: How does the Church incorporate relevant cultural forms and practices into its ministry to the world?

Theological education for missionary pastors also needs more educational depth and breadth. Ministers of the Gospel in Africa need opportunities to pursue the highest levels of their intellectual abilities. There is a need for African theologians, authors, and professors. So, there needs to be a commitment from the African church to develop faculty members at the highest possible levels of education in their area of the continent or language group. The commitment to educate at the highest levels needs to correspond to educating missionary pastors at the lowest levels, which means, according to Dr Ken Walker, to bring ministerial education to “the masses.” In fact, our best educators should be the ones developing certificate programmes and low literacy programmes. The development of educators also includes the enriching and equipping of lay ministry with its necessary Sunday School teachers, discipleship leaders, and youth and children’s workers. The Church of the Nazarene can and must offer more opportunities for God-called missionary pastors and laypeople to enter the journey of intellectual and ministerial preparation to help them serve a growing and changing world.

Theological education for missionary pastors should create a missionary hope for the continent of Africa and the world beyond. A recent *Trans African* magazine illustrated how Africa is becoming a sending church, no longer just a recipient of missionaries. The church on this continent is beginning to see the world through global lenses (Jenkins, 2002). Africans are unusually gifted with the ability to learn and speak several languages, including Portuguese, French, German, Arabic, and English. These languages have been called “colonial” languages, remnants of a sometimes terrible era in African history. But, the Wesleyan “optimism of grace” acknowledges the ability to use these languages as a head start for African missionaries to reach South America, North America, Europe, and Asia with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is only a glimpse of the vision God has for Africa. The future of the holiness tradition around the globe now lies in the hands of thousands of African pastors, theologians, teachers, and lay workers. There is little time to look backward. In words of theologian Jürgen Moltmann, “We do not drift through history with our backs to the future and our gaze returning ever and again to the origin, but we stride confidently towards the promised future” (1967, 298). Our focus should be on future generations of missionary pastors and their churches to whom the promise of scriptural holiness will come to fruition.

References

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