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**Title: 'Compassionate Theology and Praxis for Wesley's World Parish:
A Missiological Imperative for Today'**

By Rev. Dr. Valentin Dedji

Mobile: +44 7811863494; E-Mail: shalom2040@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract

This paper is partly based on my personal missionary experience in the UK, particularly in North London. My main objective is to encourage afresh Methodist theologians to rethink Wesley's theology for contemporary Methodism. I will do so, as a British Methodist minister, from francophone West African origins. My interests in Wesley's way of theologising arose from his own theological emphases, his reliance on the apostolic faith for forming his followers' character and community; but more specially, I am irresistibly drawn to his passion for the poor and his evangelical commitment to God's reign over all creation. I will plead for an urgent need to pay more attention to how Wesley maintained a healthy and creative tension between doctrine as normative thinking and doctrine as lived reality. On a practical level I will highlight the fact that, it was Wesley's Theological understanding of God's universal grace, justice and mercy that led to his opposition to all sorts of human exploitation, particularly slavery. Likewise, his Armenian convictions served as a theological foundation for his theological response to Class Distinctions and in opposing slavery.

I will conclude by pointing to some key features of Wesley's approach to evangelisation namely: joining in the struggle against the forces of sin and corruption in order to share in the transformation of life in response to the coming reign of God.

Engaging in 'a space of experience', Exploring 'a horizon of hope'

Recent developments in Church history and theological movements teach us that 'Liberation theology' was born in Latin America in the 1960s when theologians and bishops of the Roman Catholic Church recognized that the majority of its members were mainly poor people. Re-reading the Scriptures they discovered that, Jesus Christ had a special concern for the poor and oppressed. Since then, a new way of doing theology from the perspective of the poor has 'emerged' and influenced Christians of all traditions all over the world.

However when as Methodist theologians, we take time to engage with an in-depth comparative study between contemporary liberation theologies and the theology of John Wesley, we are surprised by the insights that emerge from allowing Wesley and liberation theologies to engage in mutual dialogue. Such an exercise has personally convinced me that, it would be truly fruitful to me as a Methodist mission-minded theologian and a practicing minister to bring my dialogue with Wesley's theological legacy into my engagement with contemporary issues. Therefore, offering to deal with a topic relating to Wesley's Way of theological thinking and praxis for today, is not a reactionary agenda. For theology, says Paul Ricoeur, emerges at the intersection of between 'a space of experience' and 'a horizon of hope.' In that space, there occurs a personal contact with the witness of Jesus, a Galilean itinerant preacher, whom we know through the biblical story. That hope is expressed not in the repetition of that narration, but in its re-creation in the life of those who feel called by the experience of Jesus and his friends. Theology is truly a hermeneutic of hope, a hermeneutic that must be done and redone continually. In Scripture it is called 'giving an account of hope' (1 Peter 3: 15).

It is that 'space of experience' which John Wesley filled in with his passionate and compassionate ministry that I propose to engage with in this paper, in order to explore the 'horizon of hope' that such an engagement may offer to the numerous anonymous poor and oppressed of our cities and villages today. I will focus more specially on my experience of 'reverse-mission' in Tottenham, North London. For, wherever we are called into mission, the witness of Jesus is ever challenging and disturbing. The fact that Jesus is the reference point is not a fixation on the past,

but rather a way of bringing him into the present. In human communities today across many places in Africa and in our cities in Europe, we have poignant stories of human misery and tragedies, many of them simple and everyday, and thus having less public impact. They all challenge those who live isolated from others, but they are likewise invitations to a change of attitude. The point is not that there is no room for logical argument and systematic thought in theology, but rather that they must always draw nourishment from a faith that reveals its full meaning only in a living and life-giving story.

Global Citizenship: Challenges, Responsibilities and Accountability

John Wesley was quite intuitive and well ahead of his time when, in 1739 at the beginning of his evangelistic ministry he wrote to Rev James Harvey, one of his former students at Lincoln College, Oxford stating: *'I look upon all the world as my parish...This is the work which I know God has called me to, and sure I am that his blessing attends it.'* While for some, such a statement may be seen merely as an abstract slogan, John Wesley demonstrated the opposite through his passionate ministry among the 'down-trodden of the earth' of his time, across Great Britain and America. Nearly twenty years later, John Wesley's convictions were put to test. He wrote in his journal on February 17, 1758:

I preached at Wandsworth. A gentleman from America has again opened a door in this desolate spot. In the morning, I preached in Mr Gilbert's house. Two negro servants of his, and a mulatto, appear to be much awakened. Shall not Christ's saving grace be known unto all nations?

In fact, the missiological implications of Wesley's world-wide evangelistic convictions have, without any doubt surpassed all the global dimensions that he would have thought of. For contemporary Methodist communities and theologians who may claim to be 'heirs' of the Wesley's missionary movement, there are numerous challenges as well as responsibilities and accountability attached to such a legacy. There is an urgent invitation here to get out of our 'small' comfort zones, in order to 'see' and to get practical with the multi-faceted issues in the global mission field where we have been called into.

As for me, when asked to introduce myself, I occasionally respond like Thabo Mbeki:¹

¹. Thabo Mbeki is a former President of South Africa.

I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of my native land.²

But there is more: I am a British Methodist minister, originally from a French-speaking country, Benin³ in West Africa. I must confess that deep within me there is a creative tension between what it means to remain truly African as well as being Christian. Being Methodist does not solve but epitomizes this dilemma. Thomas Birch Freeman, a Wesleyan missionary from Twyford, England, introduced Methodism to Benin in 1843. Freeman's missionary visit to the then Kingdom of Dahomey started as an 'accidental encounter' between the then slave-dealer King Ghezo; but it ended up by putting Benin, a small former French colony on the global map of the Wesleyan family. Subsequently, I came to Britain in 1995 to undertake my doctoral research programme which I completed three years later at the University of Cambridge. Although studying in a reputable British academic institution was one of my life's dreams, my prime motive was to get to know British Methodism inside out, since its teachings, its doctrine, its spirit and its discipline had a great impact on my upbringing and my extended family.⁴

The combination of my African origins together with my initial education in French universities and my British citizenship offers me the unique privilege of claiming to be a 'global citizen'.⁵ However, such a privilege dawned on me with a big sense of responsibility and accountability. Crucially, I wanted to

² . Thabo Mbeki, Statement of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, on Behalf of the African National Congress, on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of 'The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill 1996'. Cape Town, 8 May. Johannesburg; Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Foundation, 1996.

³ . Benin, formerly known as Dahomey, was one of the biggest suppliers of slaves to European slave merchants. In December 1999, while European and American leaders were still arguing about whether or not they should apologise for their role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the then President of Benin, Mathieu Kérékou called for a historic gathering of spiritual leaders to apologise--to Africans of the Diaspora--for the legacy of slavery.

⁴ . My grandfather was a Local Methodist Preacher, my father was a Methodist minister; my younger brother and his wife are both ordained Methodist ministers.

⁵ . Besides, I have travelled extensively in numerous countries across the globe. Often, I take with me members of my congregations on what we call 'Mission trips' in order to see God's creation from a global perspective, but also to experience how local people live out their faith with dignity in their difficult contexts and circumstances.

remain rooted into the daily realities of people's culture and their existential life issues that have shaped my world views. Consequently, whether I am walking along the streets of Porto-Novo, the capital city of my native Benin in West Africa, whether I am immersing myself in the 'local realities' of people who live in slums in the suburbs of Nairobi (Kenya), Bombay (India), Jakarta (Indonesia) or whether I am on one of those risky visits to the Favellas in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo (Brazil) or whether I am on pastoral visits in my local communities in Tottenham and Enfield (North London) where I am currently a Circuit minister, I have to open my eyes in order to 'see' the numerous forgotten poverty-stricken God's people, mostly economic migrants from Africa, the Caribbean Islands, Eastern Europe, refugees from war torn countries. I have to open my ears in order to hear the silent cries of innumerable abused women and exploited migrants workers held captives in the 'underground' network of people traffickers. The scary irony is that these issues are not confined to the past and are not isolated. They are traumatic realities in people's daily life today, in villages and big cities across the world. I agree with Inderjit Bhogal⁶ that 'the contemporary world can hardly be understood without taking this legacy into account.'⁷ Whether we are on local or global scales of Wesley's visionary world parish, we are faced with the haunting facts that these matters are constantly mutating like unpredictable viruses into child labour, sex tourism, sex trafficking, sexual oppression. As such these issues are a scar on humanity, and an assault on the image of God in human beings. It is indeed a human tragedy on a full scale that today, some 50 million people are displaced and misplaced within their own countries, or as refugees in other countries as result of persecution, poverty, war and homophobia.

Few years ago, as I was on my own journey of self-discovery and a search of inspiration, I came across an insightful passage from the Bible: '*If you oppress poor people, you insult God who made them; but kindness to the poor is an act of*

⁶. Past President of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, 2000.

⁷. Inderjit Bhogal, forward in, Joseph B. Suray, *Towards a Theology of Universality*, 2015

worship.’ (Proverbs 14: 31, Good News’ translation). The discovery of that particular verse was a true ‘eureka’ moment. St Irenaeus radically endorsed that proverbial wisdom by stating that: *‘The Glory of God is humanity fully alive’*. Conversely, this implies that any pattern of beliefs, any individual action or any social structure that degrades humankind and God’s creation, does not glorify God. John Wesley’s own personal experience and his life-long conviction that, one cannot know and serve Jesus Christ without friendship with the poor, made him stand in the same prophetic and patristic tradition which advocates God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’. John Wesley went beyond mere theological reflections about the fate of the poor in societies of his times; he took radical actions by attacking the exploitation of the poor. More significantly, he did attack the rich for exploiting the poor, and he did show what was much later to be called a ‘bias to the poor’ and what Marxists would later call ‘solidarity’ with the poor.⁸

Challenges of ‘Reverse Mission’

Global citizenship through missionary presence in different locations and contexts is not a simple act of presence. This has an impact on the life of those who may be at the receiving end. When in March 2000, I was officially invited by the Methodist Church in Great Britain to take the pastoral charge of St Mark’s Methodist Church in Tottenham (North London), this was greeted with joy by the members of my ‘home’ church and the whole Methodist Church in Benin. I was commissioned and sent as ‘missionary’ from Benin to Great Britain. This is called ‘reverse mission’. For historically, we have been used to seeing missionaries being sent from the Western hemispheres (centre) to the southern hemispheres (periphery). For the last two decades, ‘reverse missionaries’ like me have been struggling to get into ‘the norm’.

Once in Tottenham, I did not want to repeat past mistakes made by some European missionaries in Africa and Asia by ignoring contextual realities and by

⁸. See Joseph B. Suray, *Towards a Theology of Universality: John Wesley’s Socio-Economic, Political & Moral Insights on British & Indian Caste Distinctions*, Christian World Imprints, New Delhi, 2015.

Here, I also acknowledge the fantastic and well detailed publications by Randy Maddox, Ed. *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology For Contemporary Methodism*, Kingswood Books Nashville, 1998.

Theodore Jennings, Jr, *Good News to the Poor*, John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990.

overlooking local people's cultures, customs and traditions. Thus, my first step was to get myself acquainted with few facts about my new 'mission field'.

Tottenham is a suburb of the London Borough of Haringey. Haringey is the 13th most deprived borough in the Great Britain and the 4th most deprived borough in London. Drug addiction and unemployment rates are among the highest in London. It is also believed that Black male adults are more likely to be at the receiving end of local police officers' stop and search policies. Consequently in Tottenham, due to human deprivation, one in four male adults has depression/ mental illness problems. The tragedy is that, there is recent trend of mental illness affecting also young people. Worse, until about fifteen years ago, schools in Tottenham had sent more children to prisons than to universities! In his book '*Out of the Ashes*', the Tottenham MP David Lammy states that his 'biggest fear growing up was not bigger kids or even National Front bullies', but rather that [he] would end up in prison.' Lammy was convinced that 'that was the fate of growing numbers of [his] peers.'⁹ Lammy goes further by describing his teenage life in Tottenham as follows:

In many homes, father figures were missing as families crumpled under the stress of economic hardship. In schools, achievement was dragged down by a culture of low expectations... Street life was tough, with the less savvy always at risk of being relieved of their cash or jewellery by youths that everyone knew not to mess with.¹⁰

My most exciting discovery was that South Tottenham is reported to be the most ethnically-diverse area in Europe, with up to 300 languages spoken by its residents. In 2013, St Mark's Methodist of which I was the minister in charge did mirror that reality: members were from 42 different nationalities, mostly Sub-Saharan African countries, the Caribbean Islands and the UK! That was and still is a true providential challenge: this world of persons, cultures and faiths is 'my parish'! When I look at it in this intimate way, this 'world parish' becomes an opportunity for me as a 'reverse missionary' and for the Methodist Church and for other churches here, as elsewhere in a true ecumenical spirit.

In fact, I had the privilege to join an enthusiastic ecumenical ministry team.¹¹ We set ourselves the great challenge to offer pastoral assistance (materially and spiritually), not only to the parish members but also to the inhabitants of our local

⁹. David Lammy, *Out of the Ashes*, Guardian Books, 2011, p.2

¹⁰ . David Lammy, *op.cit.*, p.2

¹¹. Apart from me as Methodist minister, there were also Anglican, Baptist, Roman Catholic, URC, and a number of Pentecostal ministers belonging to '*Christians Together in Tottenham*'.

communities. In 2001, we initiated and set up a 'Police and Clergy Consultation Group.'¹²

Our main objective was to assist the then Police Chief Commander and his officers to bridge the gaps between them and the local populations.¹³ Part of our Mission Statement was to: 'Be the prophetic voices and the critical eyes on behalf of the local communities.' Additionally, we were to: 'Facilitate gradual reconciliation between the Borough Police Officers, and to work with them, not for them.' Some of our priorities included, tackling domestic violence, child poverty and school truancy that were becoming endemic. We also championed our critical views over police strategies of 'stop and search'. That was our way to put the Methodist doctrine of social holiness into practice.

My first encounter with people in my 'new mission field' was like a moving initiation to the human dimension of my fast developing ministry. As I was walking through the streets of Tottenham, I could perceive the full-scale dimension of physical problems. I had to adjust my eyes and ears in order to accommodate myself to the defiant jubilation of those women, men and young people who surprisingly, did not seem affected by or ashamed of their neighbour-hood. In other contexts, this neighbourhood could have been the symbol of local residents' social failure, and the decay of their own being. In such a complex and eye opening context, one of my challenging questions was: how would Wesley's compassionate and practical approach to ministry help me to show the 'human face of God' to those disillusioned people that I encounter on daily basis? Could Wesley's 'old' theological doctrine and principles be of any help in my twenty first century mission context? Alternatively, should I adopt the controversial approach used by a number of evangelists from African Pentecostal churches who, drawing on the Old Testament image of 'dry bones', construct Europe as a spiritual desert to which they are called

¹². This 'Consultation Group' was the very first of this kind in the UK. Few years later, it gave birth to the more official 'Haringey Social Forum'.

¹³. This initiative was well-needed in this crisis ridden community. The crisis goes back to the 1970 and the 1980 with constant tensions between the local police forces and members of the Black community. On the 6th October 1985, those tensions degenerated into the historic 'Broadwater Farm Riots' during which the police officer Keith Blakelock was murdered by angry mobs. Those sad events were the aftermaths of the arrest on the previous day by local police officers of a young Black man named Floyd Jarrett. He was suspected of driving a car with a false Road Tax. During the search of his family flat, the young man's mother, Cynthia Jarrett died of a suspicious 'heart-attack' in the hands of police officers. Over the years, with local police officers' violent strategies in order to find and bring to justice the murderer of their colleague, tensions got bitter and bitter.

as evangelists, a fact that is not always appreciated by the host society. Indeed, the reversal of responsibility implied in this attitude drastically overturns the traditional relations between Africans and Europeans. It is in sharp contrast with the conventional view of existing north-south relations, often equated with black-white relations, and hardly conforms to the marginal position of the majority of Africans in Europe. On the European side, the reversal of roles appears difficult to appreciate as it does not comply with the stereotypes often attached to Africa. Africans are traditionally represented as on the receiving end and Europe on the giving end of a relationship characterised by unequal transfer.¹⁴

As for me I chose to remain grounded in, and seek inspiration from Wesley's compassionate ministry towards the poor and the marginalised. Thus, as I rejoice labouring in my master's 'new vineyard' in Tottenham, I constantly think about the essence and the implications of my commissioning into 'reverse mission.' My key guiding principle was to remind myself that Mission is above all, God's own Mission (*Missio Dei*) towards his people and his creation. This view of mission assumed something of a consensus in the late twentieth century. Mission as God's mission implied a move from the periphery of church and theological concerns – as the activity of enthusiasts in far-away places – to establish mission as an intrinsic part of what it means to be Christian and to be church. At the same time it implied a change in the nature of mission activity from a series of tasks commanded by God to the realisation of God's promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) and eternal presence (Matt. 28:20). These new insights were the result both of reflection by Western theologians on the church fathers and also of increasing dialogue with the Orthodox churches. So that, in regard to mission, most Christians in the Western traditions could agree with contemporary theologians that mission is a participation in the life of the Trinity: 'Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God is in God's own self a life of communion and that God's involvement in history aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into communion with God's very life.' So that mission aims primarily at the transmission of the life of the communion

¹⁴. For more details, see my paper: Valentin Dedji, 'Non-White Pentecostalism on a White Continent: Missiological Challenges from Africa for Europe' in, Timothy Yates, *Mission and the Next Christendom*, Cliff College Publishing, 2005, pp.107-117.

that exists in God.¹⁵ Thus, like God's Spirit, irresistible and free-flowing, the nature of God's Mission implies (in principle) its 'free movement' from everywhere to everywhere.

As a reverse-missionary from a former French colony, now serving in London, I need to re-think the concept of 'mission', away from its historical connotations of 'submission'. For, from its historical inceptions, missiology was tied, not only to the short chain of ecclesiology, but also by many chains that tie it to different societies and political contexts. Because of this past, many Latin American theologians, rooted in the Theology of Liberation, tried to substitute the paradigm of 'mission' for the concept of 'evangelisation.' Unfortunately however, a change of name does not automatically change the mentality or the practice. Hence, I need to constantly remind myself that being 'a reverse missionary' does not automatically exempt me from past errors. Today, there is an urgent need for theologians to draw mission away from the shadows of 'submission' in order to seek new reasons for a missionary presence – the presence of a guest in the home of the Other, of sister or brother in the midst of the poor, disciple in the following of Jesus and vulnerable servant in the force of the gospel.

Humane Mission: Re-labelling the Price of our Human Relations

It is my strong view that to be more humane and compassionate, Mission needs to be seen and needs to see the world through the lenses of a 'new vision'. This new vision – the cure of the blind man in the synoptic gospels – is the last and most significant miracle. Mission in this perspective means 'exogamy,' marriage outside one's own tribe. Therefore, 'missiological exogamy' means the prohibition of 'ecclesio-centric incest.' Paulo Suess argues that this 'exogamy', the seeking of a bride outside one's own tribe 'is not an optional attitude, but a command of the Lord.'¹⁶ The 'missionary command' should be understood in the metaphor of the Father's command, which is a command of love and wisdom. This command is part of the 'nature' of the Church of Christ: 'As the Father has sent me, I send you'

¹⁵. Ion Bria (ed.) *Go Forth in Peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), p.3.

¹⁶. See Paulo Suess, 'The gratuitousness of the Presence of Christ in the Broken World of Latin America,' in, *The Journal of the International Association of Mission Studies*, vol xvii, No.1/2, 33/34, 2000, p.72.

(John 20:21). History shows us that the fulfilment of the 'Father's command' is not always free from the desire of compensations of power, compensatory warmth of the lost home by the heat of a holy war, whenever love is confused with submission. We must also really 're-label the price' of our human relations. This 're-pricing' or 'giving new meaning' to human relationships, begun by Jesus Christ, moves around three axles: gratuitousness (sharing), closeness (incarnation, inculcation) and universality (non-exclusion, going beyond the boundaries of blood and race).¹⁷

In the world of competition and social exclusion, where the market price is the value of anything, the essence of Christian mission is tied in the recovery of an alternative space for non-market and sharing. This space is configured by the gratuitousness of creation and of redemption by the cross by Jesus of Nazareth. Due to the cross, Christianity not only renders unnecessary all other redemptive sacrifices, but actively rejects any powers that produce human victims. The cross is the last sacrifice with the approval of God. The post-paschal 'sacrifice' is 'thanksgiving' (Eucharist), 'memorial and proclamation of the last sacrifice' and 'solidarity with the victimised' until the ends of the earth. The world of the big neo-liberal discourse, which legitimates the sacrifice of the poor, is a world of idolatry, violence and alienation.

The poor, those excluded, migrants and the indigenous peoples, bearers of the good news of the way, warn Christian communities of the dangers that come from domestication, sedentary life and adaptation to the fashions and to what is 'culturally correct' in any age. The recovery of spaces of gratuitousness demands of Christian gratuitous presence and action. Gratuitousness, as a theological inspiration, necessarily impels towards institutional simplicity. Only light structures allow the practice of gratuitousness. Pilgrim churches will be churches that are light in structures, simple, transparent, and free of the 'problems of the circulatory disturbances,' caused by a sedentary life. The church answers the complexity of the world by a simplicity which is a sign of its authentic transformation.

¹⁷. For this last aspect, I strongly recommend the book of Joseph B. Suray, *Towards a Theology of Universality* (chapters 3, 4 and mostly 6).

Insights from John Wesley's Compassionate Theology

As an African proverb says: 'When you are not clear about where you are going, remember where you come from.' In the past, some official publications have endeavoured at emphasising the evangelistic roots and the self-identity of Methodism. Such was the case of '*Message and Mission of Methodism*' (1946) which aimed at revitalizing the evangelistic outreach of the Church. In his book '*The Social Witness of Methodism*' (1948), Maldwyn Edwards highlighted social action by Methodists, modelled by John Wesley as an option for a great social reformation. Tim Macquiban rightly comments that Wesley's witness among the poor, his opposition to slaves-trade, as well as providing health and educational services for the masses, 'resonated with the call for Methodist involvement in the affairs of the welfare state'¹⁸.

Throughout my theological endeavours and my ministry, I have tried to reflect on the ways in which Methodists have sought from the beginning to proclaim in word and deed the liberating gospel at home and abroad. Of course, we would not pretend that all was right with the witness of Methodism. But as a movement of renewal seeking to celebrate world mission, we have a legacy with which we can come to terms with issues of today and beyond. Thus, some of the most striking insights that I draw from Wesley's compassionate ministry come from some of the final and tragic '*Thoughts upon Methodism*' which John Wesley wrote near the end of his life. He was deeply weary that the eighteenth century Oxford movement was degenerating into 'a dead sect with the form of religion but without its power'. Two factors, according to Wesley, were leading to such a fatal situation. Firstly, the loss of 'the doctrine, spirit and discipline' with which the movement began. Secondly, the emerging affluence of Methodists, with the resulting separation from the poor.¹⁹ Such a stark and honest assessment by Wesley is still valid today, with some serious prophetic implications. Unless the Wesleyan movement is continually replenished through its theological foundations, while remaining solidly grounded in its compassionate ethos towards the poor and the oppressed, it would end up

¹⁸. Timothy Macquiban, 'Dialogue With the Wesleys: Remembering Origins', in Clive Marsh, ed. *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (Continuum, New York, London: 2004), p.18

¹⁹. John Wesley, '*Thoughts upon Methodism*' (4 August 1786), Works 9:527-30. Wesley expressed this same concern in his Sermon 107, 'On God' Vineyard' (Works 3:503-17), which was written in 1787 after his final tour of the Methodist work across Britain.

becoming a mere nostalgic monument.²⁰ This is indeed the biggest challenge for the contemporary Methodist movement. Thus, it was the said remark by Wesley that motivated me to start my own search of 'a practical theology of mission.' For, I understood that as a theologian and minister, I had to break from theology as a purely cerebral discipline in order to keep my theological convictions deeply rooted in the human dimension of my ministerial vocation.

Making the Message of Salvation through Christ, Practical and Contextual

As a Methodist theologian, I have always observed with a keen interest how Wesley maintained a healthy and creative tension between doctrine as normative thinking and doctrine as lived reality. As such, in viewing the world as his 'parish', Wesley was deeply conscious of the transforming power of the message of the Kingdom of God and God's justice. Thus, no one was as relentless as John Wesley in his condemnation of every acts and systems that oppressed, alienated and degraded humankind. That was particularly true of slavery. He called it 'the sum of all villainies'. For Wesley the message of salvation, liberation in Christ, meant that all persons should be free and respected as made in the image of God and sharing a common humanity with others. Wesley remarked about the situation of slaves in the West Indies: 'It is better that that all these islands should remain uncultivated for ever; yes, it would be more desirable that they were all sunk in the depth of the sea than that they should be cultivated at so high a price as the violation of justice, mercy and truth.' As John Wesley's ministry was a remarkable practical embodiment of his theological views, his full and encouraging support to the abolitionist William Wilberforce finally bore fruit. Through their joint campaign, they managed to get the slave trade officially abolished in 1807 and slavery itself in 1834. In the West Indies, the Slaves who had come under the influence of the Gospel received their freedom in an act of worship in each of the islands. They heard St Paul's words to the Galatians:

'For freedom in Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... For you are called to freedom;

²⁰. For detailed arguments for these views, see: Theodore Jennings, Jr. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990. See also, Randy L. Maddox (ed.), *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, Kingswood Books, Nasville, 1998.

only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servant to one another.' (Galatians 5: 1, 13).

Rediscovering Genuine Concerns about the poor

Nothing that touched the lives of people escaped Wesley's attention. He declared that Methodism was raised up by God 'to reform the nation and specially the Church and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.' And for Wesley, scriptural holiness meant commitment to God and to God's purpose of love for all. Thus he was concerned about the poor, the unemployed, the prisoners, the sick. He established schools and gave full support to Robert Raikes in spreading the Sunday School movement. In a Britain which was getting rich in the midst of great poverty, Wesley addressed the issue of 'The use of Money'. He ends his sermon on this theme by exhorting his audience and especially his readers:

I entreat you, in the name of the Lord Jesus, act up to the dignity of your calling... No more waste! Cut off every expense which fashion, caprice, or flesh and blood demand! No more covetousness! But employ whatever God has entrusted you with in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree, to the household of faith, to all men! ... Give all you have, as well as all you are, a spiritual sacrifice to him who withheld not from you his Son, his only Son...

As Philip Potter quite rightly observed in his lecture, in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Methodist Missionary Society, 'In these and other ways, Wesley approached public issues of his time in the light of God's grace, God's self-giving love which is the very heart of the Gospel.'²¹

More than three centuries after the death of John Wesley, the public issues that he had the courage to deal with, in the light of Christ's transforming message have not yet disappeared. On the contrary, in the course of the last two decades, we are living in a global economic and financial system which dominates every sphere of human life. This is particularly the case of the immense power of new forms of communication which are more and more penetrating the consciousness of people everywhere. But it is a world of great imbalances between rich and poor nations and also within nations. The term globalization is given to this phenomenon, and nowadays the moguls of finance and of the economy speak of their ecumenical task.

²¹. Philip Potter, 'Celebrating World Mission' in, *Epworth Review*, Vol.24/3, July 1997,p.17

But plainly, it is their hegemony over the whole inhabited earth. They are the lords of the *oikoumene* which is in direct contrast to the words of Psalm 24: 'The earth is the Lord's and its fullness, the world (*oikoumene*), and all who dwell in it.' We are all caught in this idolatrous system. The effects of such a system are there to be seen. The two-thirds or almost three-fourths poor world is saddled with debt which in reality they have already paid by the exorbitant interest they have had to contribute into the coffers of the rich nations. Debt still causes many kinds of slavery today. Debt robs the poor of what is necessary for life. Douglas Meeks reminds us that 'We who pray "forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors," must remember how debt in all its forms closes God's household to millions of people.'

This is where the Gospel's challenge comes in. The very last parable recorded in the Gospel of Matthew underlines the whole point of Jesus' mission and ministry. He warns those who hear him that their standing before God is not determined by their belief in Christian doctrine, nor their association with the Christian community, but by whether they have fed the hungry and clothed the naked. As Douglas Meeks put it so starkly, 'God has a soteriological claim upon the poor, for it is in them that the Glory of God's power for life appears.²²' God liberated God's people when they were strangers and oppressed; therefore God's redeemed people should show the same compassion toward the needy in their midst.

Concluding Remarks

1. *Constructing a Conscience for an Integral and Ethical Ecology*

In advocating compassionate theology and praxis for our 'world parish', it is about time that we address issues of 'poverty', 'injustice' and oppression in an integrated approach in relation with ecology. For, '*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and all who live in it.*' (Psalm 24:1). This is where our responsibility and accountability of global-citizenship come in. As such, tackling ecological issues is a matter of serious theological concern. Until recently particularly in Africa, ecological

²². Douglas Meek, *Sanctification and Economy; A Wesleyan Perspective on Stewardship*, in Randy Maddox, Ed., *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, Kingswood Books, Nashville, 1998, p.87.

issues have been blatantly neglected within theological circles.²³ To be more specific, ecology used to be considered in Africa as a superficial romanticism that intends to celebrate the beauty of nature and to desire a clean environment for the sole benefit of Western tourists. This is where I fully appreciate the views of the Congolese theologian Kä Mana who states that the time has now come 'to take ecology out of the circle of those false or caricatured conceptions'. As Kä Mana puts it, 'the matter at stake is a world-wide issue that must enliven a new consciousness of the dangers that threaten the whole humankind'.²⁴ It is my conviction that the matter is even more serious now than in the past as, this time, there will not be any Noah's ark to save some few while others would perish: either we are all saved or we all take the risk of disappearing. In this vision of integrity and globality, I fully subscribe to Leonardo Boff's words according to which:

As far as ecology is concerned, everything that exists co-exists. Everything that exists pre-exists. And everything that co-exists and pre-exists subsists through an interminable web of inclusive relations. Everything is in relation. Outside relation, nothing exists.²⁵

This is where the Book of Genesis attracts our attention, to reflect differently and to reassess our ministry towards God's *Oikoumene*: '*God looked at everything He had made and He was very pleased.*' (Genesis 1: 31). Such an appreciation of the work of God by its own creator is a clear revelation of 'a fundamental ecological truth.' Such a truth implies that against forces of chaos in human hearts and in our societies and nature, we have to live and act in such a way that what one creates appears to be good in order to glorify our common creator. But, it is crucial to stress that what is 'good' is not just in the aesthetic sense of the term, but also in the ethical sense of a harmonised social environment where one can live happily. This is an invitation to get out of an idyllic and tranquil social harmony in order to embark on a dynamic and offensive vision for the reconstruction of the German philosopher Hannah Arendt has called 'The human condition'.

²³. During the 6th General Assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches held in 1992, discussions on environmental issues have been inscribed high on the agenda. Since then, a good numbers of colloquia have been organised at sub-regional levels. See, 'Stewardship and Integrity of Creation' in Timothy Kiogora & Harold Miller (eds), *Abundant Life in Christ*, pp. 3 & 23-26.

²⁴. Kä Mana, 'Pour L'Ethique de la Vie: Bible, Ecologie et Reconstruction de l'Afrique', p.39

²⁵. Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, p.40.

2. Paying attention to concrete 'Human condition.'

There is a paradox when the church tries to 'spiritualise' the Gospel's message about the poor. The Beatitudes are in fact more a revelation about God rather than about the poor. They tell us who God is and what kind of kingdom His kingdom is.

Therefore, to know Christ is to do justice and to hope to see it done in history. Consequently, the church should signify the salvation it announces. The Eucharist should be a demonstration of human charity; the word preached should challenge injustice. In this way compassionate theology, together with Armenian Grace as formulated and lived by John Wesley provided a biblical basis for reflective Christian action on behalf of the 'stranger', the 'marginalised' and the 'oppressed' in our midst.

3. Reinventing the Gospel's practices of Grace and Gratitude

As I have highlighted throughout this paper, our contemporary context is one of a dehumanising market, political schemes with no credibility, a judicial system that favours the powerful, a loss of values breaking up our families together with communities and societies. In such a context, the calling of churches should tend toward becoming more communities of belonging/inclusion, of celebration and rejoicing, joy and hope, rather than communities of law or exclusion. It is important to link grace and human dignity; both refer to God, and both refer to human beings. Human dignity and divine grace are inseparable because it is not possible to experience grace without human dignity. Where there is no human dignity, there is an absence of God's grace; where there is human dignity, in some way God's grace and God's glory are present. Churches that fulfil God's mission should enable the manifestation of God's grace and gratitude, together with His glory.