

ECCLESIOLOGY IN AN ECUMENICAL CONTEXT: IMPRESSIONS FROM WEST AFRICA

Methodism was for me part of the air Ghana (Gold Coast) breathed. We, the 'Wesleyans' were the predominant anyamesomfo (worshippers of God) at Akyinakrom, Efiduase, Sunyani and Wenchi where my father's 'Travelling' took us. In the quarter of Asamankese where my paternal grandparents lived was Fante and Methodist. (One could almost say and therefore methodist, and that would be a fairly accurate statement). The section of Kumasi where I grew up could be described as a 'Mission Station' since it housed The Joint Theological College, Wesley College, Mmofrature, Osei-Tutu boys' school all but the first being exclusively Methodist, and so was all my pre-secondary education. So that although from the day I set foot in Achimota School, I was to be immersed into 'ecumenical christianity, I am to this day having to explain why I did not attend Wesley Girls' High School, Cape Coast the birthplace of Ghana's Methodism.

In spite of and probably because of Achimota school I remained a Methodist, which meant for me, society classes, class books, class leaders, leaders' meetings and synods, all household words literally if you grew up in a Methodist Mission House. It also meant large choirs and Singing Bands, congregations that sing lustily and women who prayed fervently in church and extemporise lyrics that broke into sermons to reinforce their meeting. It also meant preachers who held their listeners spell-bound and who thought nothing of going on for an hour, spurred on by lyrics and no doubt inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Growing up a Methodist meant serving and being known, you have to be a member of one small group or the other, you sang in the choir or got the room ready for leaders' meeting. You belonged to the Youth Fellowship or the Wesleyan Guild or the Christ Little Band. You truly BELONGED. What this has meant for me is that wherever I find joyful singing and Worship and small christian groups that pray together or do Bible studies the sense of belonging planted in childhood is rekindled. If I join the choir, teach Sunday school or serve as a preacher, I was at home. The Church is an immensely large community in which individuals feel at home because even when they know 'in Part' they are known. This for me is the meaning of 'Membership' One's Baptism and Reception whatever the theological implications are the symbols of one's reception into membership of this immense community of 'Worshippers of God!'. The fact that you had to choose in whether or not to become a Full Member re-emphasised one's responsibility for the nature and functioning of the community as well as one's acceptance of its reason for existing.

Living as a Methodist in Nigeria has not been a day to day, or even Sunday to Sunday involvement. The ecclesial atmosphere I live is ecumenical but my roots in Methodism are kept alive by my being co-opted to serve as Lay-preacher and as Conference Secretary for Lay Preachers and so to serving on the General Purposes Committee. I keep feeling there is a meaning in the fact that Central Committee of the WCC and the annual Conference of Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) insist on overlapping in dates and although CC/WCC has for the period that I have not been held in July for sometime, the first time I am invited to a Methodist Theological study period it is held in July and so overlaps with the Methodist work. I also note with interest that the Institute is considering what Methodism brings to the Ecumenical Movement. I have therefore in my own life a number of ecclesial case studies two of which are these.

1. The Methodist Church a Universal "CLAN" within which one felt at home irrespective of geographical location.

2. Ecumenical Circles' as global manifestations of the Christian Community in which one feels at home (a sort of christian tribe acknowledging one kingdom though belonging to distinct clans) In the Akan Socio-political structure the Methodist will be a clan within a tribe. It is the Methodist Church that concretises for me my membership of the Church.

Ecumenism and Christian Unity

While I went to Methodist and Government schools, I did know about 'United Schools' in Ghana The JTC - Kumasi (now Trinity College Legon) where my father taught for two periods of 3 years was run jointly with the Presbyterians. For me it is entirely natural that they are the ones who have remained in 'union' conversations in Ghana.

In Ibadan, there is United Missionary College (cms and mms) there are others in Umuahia there is a Trinity College which is Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian, but which is facing a crisis, one that reminds one of the crisis of church union in Nigeria of the 1960s.

In Nigeria, the rivalry of missions has jelled into a situation and an atmosphere that in my estimation is far from ecumenical. Churches, indeed christians stand ready to join in confrontation with government's educational policies, which in Nigeria was one of the earliest forms of ecumenical cooperation, but as far as the unity of christians for the sake of Belief in Christ is concerned, it has been a proverbial once bitten twice shy. It has left deep wounds. (see Ogbu Kalu, The Divided People of God) and blame is still being apportioned by various people and

laid at the feet of others The Christian Council of Nigeria as that of Ghana is the manifestation of the aspiration to oneness. Disunity is not the ideal Disunity was the way christianity was presented, we have known nothing else, this has meant that the denominations are accepted simply as brands to choose from and where the competition was 'healthy' a spirit of pro-existence developed, so that in Ghana what seems to be the prevailing spirit is a mutual respect for the existence and ministry of the other at least among the 'Free Churches'.

The ecumenical scene in West Africa is of course made more complex by churches one might call CHARISMATIC CHURCHES, whose genesis are not directly Roman Catholic or Euro-American Protestantism. Relationship between these Charismatic churches and the others is still an area of growth and fluidity.

Methodists and Unity in Nigeria

There had been a rather pronounced denominational staking in Nigeria which has resulted in some unfortunate 'leg-pulling' between Methodists and Anglicans especially west of the Niger. I have heard Anglicans claim that the 1975 Methodist constitution was designed to be "one up" on the Anglicans and Methodists who scorn at Nigerians whose "head is in Britain". Pleasant? No! It does hide a lot of unhealthy attitudes.

Within MCN itself the old split originating from the pre-Methodist Union of 1933 cannot be said to have disappeared as the areas that first felt 'uncomfortable' with implications and implementations of the 1975 constitutions co-incide too closely with the ex-Primitive areas to be an accident. These have now been joined by others who were Wesleyan but who now feel MCN is no longer 'Wesleyan'. What then do Nigerian Methodists see as the authentic marks of a Methodist Church. This I believe is the crucial question for this study for those are the things that as Methodists they would like to offer to other christian confessional families. This led me to conversations with Methodists from West Africa currently studying at Selly Oak and one in Paris whom I met reading the history of Methodism in The Ivory Coast from the Methodist Archives (now at the school of Oriental and African Studies, London University) asking them to tell me what makes them distinctly Methodists and about the general attitudes towards christian unity in their respective countries.

What makes us Methodists?

It is interesting how the position of the lay people in the church was lifted up as most distinctly Methodist. In conversations I have found that it is not only the Methodists of 'Primitive' extraction who felt uncomfortable with what seems to be a new wave of clericalism in

the MCN. There is a definite conviction that anything that tends to give prominence to the 'Clergy' will work towards denuding the 'democratic' structures so central to Methodism. They all go on to point out the importance of well sustained christian education programmes for ALL members. If one understands the call for revival in Nigeria, those people like the Methodists of Ivory Coast, have nothing against episcopal nomenclature but everything for the preservation of democracy described of the victory we do not want to lose by Rev. Legbedji-Aka of MC Ivory Coast; who also says that a truly M.C. is one which respect the rights and needs of the 'of the least of them' as well as what they can contribute to the life of the church. The Nigerian debate then is a question of how the current constitution is functioning. This is evidenced by the fact that even the 'The Revivalists', inspite of their advocacy for a return to the 1962 constitution still ask for an episcopal system of the American form, (with a 5 year term for the bishops who presides over Conference, and conference business), this they say should be given the 'necessary modifications suitable for Nigeria' so they are not ruling out the fact that Nigeria may evolve something special for itself. Sharing in what makes for a healthy church by all members is a must.

Another Methodist emphasis underlined by those I talked to is the opportunity for personal participation. The need to know and be known shows up in the repeated call for more organised Bible study groups, consultations with lay people on matters which affect the church eg the acquisition and disposal of property, the call for more 'open meetings' to enable members of the church to observe how the decision-making process functions, and a widening of the categories of participants.

Simplicity of worship and of style of life is also seen as part of the Methodist heritage. On the other hand Legbedji-Aka is of the opinion that both sacraments are too devoid of ritual and symbolism. Something he says has to be done to put back some of the mystery and holiness back into those services. We respect our bodies he said, why can't we show some respect to the Body and Blood of our Lord? He asks. If we learn to respect his Body we shall respect the bodies of our fellow human beings and if we respect his Blood, we shall respect our relationship with the whole of the humanity whom God has made of One Blood. This he says is how to enable the sacraments to affect the life and true unity of the church. We are Wesleyans, we are of the protestant Reformation and therefore want to get rid of superstitious ritual and encourage simplicity of worship and life-style but we also have to maintain the authenticity of African spirituality if we are

to touch the lives of the people. The call to return to the "simplicity of worship practised by the founder John Wesley" and the reference to a re-affirmation of the Reformation being made in Nigeria need closer study lest these become new idols whose lack of mobility will prevent their followers from being moved by the life-giving spirit. (see Idahosa Asowata, Daily Times of Nigeria 3/3/1982)

A real concern for fervent and meaningful worship is seen in the many references and call for indigenous music. In fact this is an area of new life that is well advanced in all the four churches of which I have information. Some are still wary about the use of drums claiming it is too closely associated with "paganism".

Aka suggests for instance that 'believers baptism, by immersion' will be a more meaningful and worshipful service in the Ivory Coast. Linking this with the life of the church and the concern for evangelism he says 'we baptise children, and then sit back saying the whole village is christian, so we do not really try to win anybody for Christ. Is baptism to fill the church register or to fill the church? He asks. Infant baptism he says gives the church a good conscience. He added 'let us avoid the European sicknesses that we can avoid and maintain mission towards the conversion of young people whom we have baptised as infants as well as others. We have to stop saying 'they are baptised, we do not have to evangelise them'.

This is in line with the principle of the priesthood of all believers. For they cannot teach who have not been taught. Rev Samuel J. Dossou (The General Secretary of Eglise Methodiste au Benin), explains that this for his church means training all the people of God to be able to preach and to see the whole world as their parish. Laity development and involvement as a sign of authentic Methodism cannot be over-emphasised.

Belonging to world-wide Methodism

The existence of a global family of Methodists is seen as a positive thing. But Aka of The Ivory Coast reminds us that links with Methodists across Africa's national borders is still subordinate to our links with the British Conference. This he points out, is a continuation and a perpetuation of our missionary and colonial history which we have to out-grow. These links overseas are seen as important factors in local ecumenical endeavours and have to be clearly delineated. The global ecumenical interests of the Ivory Coast for instance is still handled by the British Conference for though the Church is autonomous it is not Independent. Locally, however it belongs to the 'Union des eglise evangelique'.

Benin's 'conseil des eglise protestante' has 24 member churches, the Methodist Church is one of them. The proliferation of churches had been so much of a bother to the government that, but for the intervention of the Methodist church it would have closed down several of the Charismatic churches in 1975. There are, all the same the usual divisions of opinion as to how far and in what form the Oneness of the Church is to be made visible. Rev. Samuel J. Dossou remarks, it may seem a strange thing to say, but disunity of the Church has been a positive factor in development of the church, when the church was stagnant in the times of Luther and Wesley their stand against the Status quo gave the church a new lease of life. But even those who want to see christian unity think more in terms some form of covenant that will enable a recognition of ministry, and sacraments "unity with each having its own identity and a council through which they can relate as a christian community vis-a-vis other human institutions" is the most favoured structure.

It seems to me that the lack of historical involvement in the Reformation and the fact that christianity came to us already divided has meant that the theological grounds for disunity do not play a predominant role in our sentiments. When Methodists in Benin considered changing the name of their Methodist church, members were not interested, what difference will it make to our work and witness they asked? In the 70's when they had discussions on the possibility of adopting episcopal nomenclature they could not get much enthusiasm from the pews for the same reason. The church he remarked should be simple and fragile its orders should not be modelled on the traditional African royalty or any other, for the Church's strength is in the weakness of the Cross. By the same token, its organisation should leave room for the operations of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is seen as a community with a Mission and should get to work demonstrating scriptural holiness and not just preach about it. What is important in ecclesiology then is how we function as a community living in the world for its evangelisation and conversion to the religion and style of life of Jesus Christ and seeking to live out our Oneness as a Church and as a Human race.

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