

Protagonist Corner

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When my husband and I returned in 1981 from thirteen years of missionary work in Ghana and Nigeria, we experienced what is called "reverse culture shock." This occurred when we sensed that we were a bit foreign to America, and it to us. Some of our adopted culture had rubbed off on us, and we faced various adjustments. We saw our homeland and our church basically through African eyes. The differences between African and American Christians were startling, and these I want to share.

Our two churches differ, I believe, over views and givens concerning time, money, and persons. In America, we view time equal with or more important than money. We spend money in order to save time. Secondly, our calendars and watches dictate our movements and our involvements. If an activity runs overtime, we complain or drop out of the activity. Thirdly, with the demands on our time at a premium, we schedule everything: when to eat, when to visit people (just to "drop in" unannounced is practically a no-no), when to take "time off," when to make love, not to mention all our appointments in schools and businesses which run "on time."

The second area which differs is affluence. I cannot begin to describe how overpowering American affluence is to a missionary from the Third World upon his or her return. What we take for granted in our American churches is seen as sheer wealth in most African countries. This includes air conditioning, pension funds for ministers, no more than three or four charges for ministers, Sunday bulletins and church school materials, church libraries, automobile allowances (and simply automobiles owned by ministers), catered church dinners, presbytery help to finance new churches. All of this helps us in the U.S. to perform our mission better, but it says a lot about what our mission is and who we are.

The third area of supreme difference is the lack of real focus on persons in our society and in our churches. Of course the time factor has limited our focus. Because we are so geared to clock-watching and because of many other commitments, we do not simply enjoy being together in worship beyond one hour. Not even a fellowship time after church draws very many to it, nor do midweek gatherings. Many in our congregations are nameless to each other. Further, what have we done to friendship when we ritualize it through signing "friendship books" passed along pews?

In Africa, on the other hand, church on Sundays is a communal event, probably like in America a century ago. Here people learn about each other's woes. There is intimate sharing and caring before, during, and after worship. There are also fellowship opportunities during the week, particularly among women's circles which meet weekly. Here they sing, pray, study, and then visit the bereaved, the indifferent, the sick in their homes.

One main thing which encourages such fellowship is not being tied to time. Among educated Africans in cities, even, no one cares about a major expenditure of time in church activities. Worship begins not at the appointed hour, but when people are ready. It ends one and a half, or two hours later. The sermon may be forty-five minutes, there may be five to six hymns, and at least two offerings.

A severe lack of funds also dictates the lifestyle of a congregation. It may meet for years on a porch or in a school while trying to build a building. Presbyteries have no funds to offer for new church building; the fund-raising is totally a do-it-yourself one. A minister may come to preach only once in awhile. In Kenya and Nigeria, I found that ministers have often thirty or more preaching points. Clergy are in short supply and lay persons take major responsibilities in church life. With no printed bulletins, the order of worship may change during worship if it needs to, and the announcements may take fifteen minutes. But no one seems to care. Churches are usually equipped with at least a small electric portable organ or piano, backless pews, possibly robes for the choir, and communion vessels. Windows are shuttered, floors are concrete. People own their hymns books and bring them to worship. Sunday school is taught to all ages in the same room, with no materials—just knowledge from the teacher. It often resembles a junior Sunday worship service, and may occur while the adults worship.

Members participate in these services enthusiastically. Several people may be involved in the prayers and Scripture lessons. Then, when the offerings are taken, people go forward to deposit their offerings in large trays at the front of the church. Often lively African music accompanies the offerings, and all the congregation may dance and sing as they go forward. Members usually give generously out of their poverty, not out of abundance. African Christians are not at all reserved in expressing needs for prayer during worship. In fact there may be prayer or healing services during the Sunday worship where members walk up front to ask for prayers from the ministers and congregation. Sometimes a laying on of hands accompanies the prayers for the individuals.

One would think that with all these deprivations the church in Africa would be struggling to survive. But the opposite is true. Christianity, including the Presbyterian churches, is growing there faster than the population. Churches are packed on Sundays: offerings, memberships, seminary enrollments are burgeoning. Their faith is expressed holistically with programs directed towards health, educational, political, and community needs. Christians look to their churches as the only source of hope and truth when under economic and political oppression. Denominations cooperate at various levels. Ecumenical churches, schools, and seminaries often exist because no one can afford denominational ones. Christians are infused with an apparent joy, Sunday through Saturday, as they experience a God who is real and present to them.

The church in Africa is vital. The time has come for us to listen and to learn.