

Problems of the Churches in Central Africa

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The question that this paper deals with is: What is the basic problem of Christian churches in central Africa? To us the answer seems to be dependency; which means that Christian churches in central Africa rely too much in every area on western Europe and North America. But defining the problem this way raises some questions.

First of all, central Africa is too big. According to the specification of the symposium it includes seven countries: Zambia, Zaire, Central African Empire, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad. In this paper we will limit ourselves to Zaire and use the Mennonite community as a case study, since Christian churches in central Africa have many traits in common--most were started as western missionary churches and all lived under colonial administration.

The *second* question has to do with the word "dependency" itself. It may mean that one puts the blame on the foreigners and avoids looking at local problems such as tribalism, jealousy, or polygamy. But these local problems are not typical to central Africa. Even the issue of polygamy could be a case of dependency if people take a stand only on the basis of what the missionaries told them. Dependency could also suggest that the solution is independence. This cannot be the case because we all know that nobody is independent. Furthermore, the churches in central Africa were born as a result of relations between western Christians and Africa; that link cannot be broken without the risk of isolation.

Third, this way of defining the problem is arbitrary. What may be basic for one person may be secondary for another. However, to us the basic problem of Christian churches in central Africa seems to be dependency. To illustrate this point, we will look at five areas of church life: administrative structures, finances, personnel, programs, and theology.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES

Most of the churches in Zaire are divided in regional conferences on the North American model. Each conference is subdivided in smaller sections. In general those sections send representatives to a general assembly which elects the board of the churches and the top officers who are responsible for the central administration. Because people have to campaign in order to be elected, there is much politicking and bribery. Sometimes each ethnic group wants its people in top leadership positions. Tension may exist between the local and central church authorities or between local groups.

This kind of structure tends to be very expensive and costly for local churches. These structures tend to emphasize voting, while African tradition is inclined to reach consensus through long discussion. However, these structures have helped to create other groupings around which African people can work beside the traditional ethnic groupings. This is very important at this time of African nationalism where people are trying to transcend their tribal groups.

The solution, in broad terms, seems to be that churches need to become decentralized; more responsibility should be given to the local churches so that people can identify themselves more with what is happening. People need to know that they are the church and that the church is theirs, rather than something imposed by an outside authority.

FINANCES

The Mennonite Church, for example, gets about 80% of its finances from North America. Most of this money is spent at the top level of administration and for traditional, institutional programs like hospitals, Bible schools, including salaries of missionaries who work in these areas. This financial dependency raises a few problems.

The first problem in this area has to do with the relationship between top administrators and local pastors. Pastors think that the administrators are there simply to have the money that comes from North America. This money is not channeled to the local congregations. Thus, people are struggling in the

church to get to the highest leadership positions because there they can receive a higher salary and good housing. The church has created social classes. The top administrators of the church form the wealthiest class; they have more money and own more private businesses than other church members.

The second problem is that of the relationship between the giver and the receiver, between North America and Africa. After a meeting with North American brothers, a church treasurer once said in a private conversation that he would not push anything that would upset missionaries because he is paid by the mission and does not want to lose his job. How can one be sure that these church leaders represent the interests of African Christians? Actually, they often represent their own personal interests or the interests of North American Christians who salary them. Psychologically, the giver has power over the recipient and can generally control the receiver.

The third problem is that this aid from North America is not going to continue forever. North American churches are considering the establishment of other mission fields in other parts of the world. Although the North American church has been sensitive to African feelings about these new fields, they still think rightly that they cannot spend all of their resources in one place. But Africans question why missionaries should start other missions while African churches are still in need.

In terms of solution, the churches in central Africa need to become self-supporting. Members tend to think that the only way for the church to be self-supporting is for the church to engage in business. They want to see the church start agricultural co-ops, small business loans, or cattle raising. Others claim that this may divert the church from its main functions, evangelization. They, therefore, propose helping individual Christians to become successful businessmen and good farmers who will make enough money to support the church.

Also, church members must be encouraged to give more of their resources to the church. If each national member gave two dollars, the church would have enough money for its annual budget.

Although these ideas may provide financial resources for local churches, one has to admit some important limitations. Church and business have different goals and need different organizations. It is quite difficult for the church to become a business and still remain the church. In the same way, it is difficult for a business to become a church and still remain a business.

Another limitation is that the local peoples' economic and cultural background does not help them to increase their giving. People are too poor. In general the annual income for the area is less than \$70 a year. Most of the people are accustomed to the role of recipient in relating to the church rather than that of giver.

PERSONNEL

In the area of human resources or personnel, although church leaders are African, the church still depends heavily on North American missionaries. All of the professional positions in the church are held by missionaries: medical doctors, qualified mechanics, builders, and theologians.

The cost of maintaining a group of missionaries in Africa is high. It costs about \$12,000 a year to maintain a young couple in Africa. Add to that figure medical expenses, lodging, and transportation, as well as overseas travel expenses. With that money one can train Africans who could do the same job and still remain in the country and be an asset to their own people. Some missionaries are sent to Africa not because they are needed but because they are available. And African leadership is then simply asked to invite them.

Sometimes it is difficult for expatriate personnel to work under African leadership. This is understandable because many missionaries have been in leadership positions themselves, whereas some of the African leaders have not had adequate experience in leadership roles.

However, there is a growing frustration of nationals in regards to the seeming inaccessibility of the management of their own churches to them as church leaders. Seemingly their destiny will always be in the hands of expatriates. There seems to be no African future.

The solution to this kind of problem is to train African leadership even if there are uncertainties as to where, when, and how such leadership can be trained and what the content of such training should include.

Whether training should take place abroad or at home depends on the kind of skills to be learned and resources available locally. Whether leadership training should be formal or informal again depends on the situation. Most Africans prefer formal training. During the colonial period people learned to recognize personal importance on the basis of a formal degree. Persons without formal degrees cannot be convinced that they should not seek such. What is important is the possession of skills that are needed rather than the degrees as such.

In other areas like mechanics, agriculture, and medicine, on-the-job training has been used. Theoretically, this is a good way to gain training and experience. Although it has worked well in many cases, it takes too long for people to get to the level of responsibility required. This frustrates both the missionary and the African. Often missionaries claim that they did not see anyone competent to learn a given position to replace the missionary eventually. Africans say that missionaries simply do not want Africans to take over. I think the truth is somewhere in between.

Another question is whether leadership should be trained in evangelism techniques, in management and economics, in agriculture, or in health. Some churches have arranged their priorities in terms of evangelism and leadership training. This means that these two foci are different. Leadership training relates to equipping the church with qualified people at the head of different church ministries, from evangelism to medical work through agricultural extension programs. Evangelism means that each one of those ministries has as its primary goal the preaching of the gospel in an appropriate way. People are being trained in the management of agricultural programs with the idea that they will help the people in the village as part of the gospel. The same thing can be said about education in medical work.

Although it is possible to train leaders in a given field with an evangelistic emphasis, the tendency has been to train people only in evangelism. Churches have many pastors and several Bible schools. However, qualified doctors, nurses, or mechanics are few. This shows that the priorities of the mission church were more oriented to converting people than to helping the converted live a fuller life. The church still depends on expatriates.

PROGRAMS

The churches still continue to work mostly in programs left by missionaries--school, hospitals, biblical institutions. The problem with this orientation is that most of church effort, personnel, and finances are channeled into these programs. And yet one cannot be sure that they meet the needs of the people. For example, the medical programs tend to be curative whereas most of the diseases that people suffer from can be prevented through public health and nutrition. The schools don't necessarily meet the needs of the country because of their emphasis on book learning and office type work.

While churches are involved in public health, agricultural and nutrition programs, these efforts are not as important as

the traditional programs. Then, too, the whole area of social and political life is one which the church should speak or do something about but doesn't often open itself to.

Many people, especially young people, migrate to the city in central Africa. These cities are growing very fast, creating problems of disintegration of traditional family life, unemployment, and urban poverty. Yet most of these people have been once Christians in their life through missionary schools. Churches can become a healing source in the urban life of Africa. Certainly people talk in Africa of urban missions, but again the emphasis is very small when one thinks in terms of what people need.

Politics can be a challenge to the churches, although one knows the danger of holding openly political attitudes. But that is not an adequate rationale to justify the silence of Christian churches in relating to political structures. In terms of solution, the churches in central Africa should try to relate to the broader and long-term concerns of African people in central Africa.

Church programs should be redefined to meet the needs of people. For example, with the breakdown of traditional structures, the church can present alternatives for some of the structures. Through non-formal education programs the church can help people to acquire the kinds of skills that are needed. This doesn't mean that evangelism becomes a low priority; but it is a way of making evangelism effective.

THEOLOGY

On the theological level, the problem is reflected in the church's dependency on its inheritance from missions. The most prevalent forms of theology and worship are those left by the missionary. Consequently, theology today does not take into account peoples' political, social, and cultural life. People don't know how to relate their faith to their traditional African background.

Often one hears stories of polygamy or witchcraft in the churches, but leaders do not take time to observe how people relate Christianity to their traditional African religions.

At the liturgical level, although several attempts are made specifically among young people to use African traditional music in worship, the church as a whole still looks at these cases as marginal. Seemingly African traditional music does not have the status of western hymns in liturgy.

The churches have given little importance to what African theologians have written about African theology. The Christian churches in central Africa should first give priority to finding how to relate not only to the traditional religious belief system, but to the traditional culture as a whole.

The church should look at the work of African scholars in theology and discover how this can be translated in terms of the life of the congregations. African theologians like Mbiti and Idowu should be read in order to see how their insights may be helpful in central Africa. Maybe the need felt by African scholars and intellectuals for an African theology is based on their own alienation from the western culture. Perhaps the common people are African enough with little need for identification through an African theology. On the other hand, there would appear to be some points of conflict between African culture and the gospel since no culture is completely compatible with the gospel. To such issues the church could address itself.

The churches should add to this task of relating Christianity to African culture a dialog with western Christianity. Such a dialog is necessary in order to avoid the danger of isolation. Dialog also facilitates mutually constructive criticisms and encourages feelings of universal Christian brotherhood and sisterhood.

This theological search needs a strong biblical basis. The churches should start this search for an African theology with strong biblical competence, scholarship, and commitment, committing itself to a higher quality of biblical training.

CONCLUSION

From these illustrations one can conclude that the Christian church in central Africa is dependent on western churches. This dependency is very well felt at this time of African nationalism. However, the solution is not independence as it may be possible to think, but interdependence. The choice is between the relation of domination and a Christian brotherhood or sisterhood. Interdependence means that Christian churches in central Africa need "partners not patrons, brothers not benefactors." It means a relationship that should allow an authentic African Christianity to develop and reflect African life and thought without being mothered by its western influence.

Response # 1

John E. Ross

The presentation by Mr. Mutombo-Mpanya is both interesting and stimulating. His exposition of the present situation and problems of the Mennonite Community of the Church of Christ of Zaire is forthright and clear. He evidences a genuine concern for the development of a truly autonomous indigenous Christian church in Zaire. He suggests means of unshackling the autonomous church from some bonds which limit its true autonomy.

The Church of Christ in Zaire is a cooperative body incorporating most sectional church groups inherited from the early mission enterprise of western church groups. During the pre-independence period, the western agencies were urging decentralization while centralizing the church in America. The program called for dispersal from centers or posts with their strength in institutions toward a village infiltration. When the African church came into its own it followed the pattern of the western church. Centralization became the goal with concurrent emphasis on central power, development of institutions and a vested authority at the head. Authority was, by constitutional act, placed in the hands of the ordained clergy. This authority has become the controller of properties, institutions, and the wealth of the church. It is parallel to the western church in this respect. There is a modicum of democratic procedure in church government which, at times, appears to be a token of response to the grass roots constituency of the Zaire church. Mr. Mutombo-Mpanya's statements of conditions in the Mennonite sector of the Church of Christ in Zaire are paralleled in many groups within the other affiliated churches in Zaire.

Some problems faced by the churches in Zaire are carried over from their heritage of mission in the past. The influences of Christianity, deeply rooted in western culture during the decades of the mission enterprise, are not easily shed. As the autonomous African church develops there will be modifications in forms of worship and interpretation of God's word are closely molded to African culture and understanding. The Kimbanguist movement is one example. It is the unique church which has its origin in Zaire itself. Other evidences of change have been seen in recent years. Distinctly African songs of worship and praise are forerunners of the movement to develop the expression of their faith and beliefs in their own way. This is to be expected, honored, and encouraged.

However, some problems are outgrowths of efforts to develop an authentic and autonomous African Christian church and community. Sister churches in other lands hunger for news of the new church. In August of 1975 Canon Burgess Carr, secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches, spoke to the delegates at the General Assembly of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in San Antonio, Texas. His message was basically a castigation of missions and missionaries of the past. It told nothing of importance that the African church is doing today. It sounded as if he were beating an old drum which needed both a new skin and a fresh rhythm. The delegates were anxious to hear what was being done by the newly autonomous church. They were disappointed. How much better it would have been if Canon Carr had told of the great things the African churches are doing now and closed with a statement saying "we know we are making some mistakes and we pray you will forgive us our errors as freely as we forgave yours when you were bringing the gospel of Christ to us."

It seems the time has come to refrain from blaming all our ills on others. The privilege of autonomy carries with it an obligation of responsibility, integrity, and devotion to the causes involved. Moving on to greater tasks and fulfilling its mission will do more to strengthen the African Christian church than recriminations. Errors will be made but mutual forgiveness will nourish the soil in which the seed of growth is planted.

Considerable concerns has been expressed about a number of practices followed by the leadership in the Church of Christ of Zaire. Among these are inner struggles for power by African leaders, the centralization of authority in a predominantly ecclesiastical hierarchy, the disparity of income between high level leadership and the constituency which supports it, and a lack of a cultural and political impact by the church on the evolving community and society which it attempts to serve. These problems are not peculiar to the African church. Struggles

for power and centralization of authority are common faults in the western churches when overdone.

Some centralization is necessary to effective working together. However, when inbred structure and vested interest can no longer communicate with or respond to the collective will of its constituency, a subtle and insidious disintegration begins. A government which is not responsive to the needs of its people will decay and die. A business which gives no attention to the requirements of the consumers will become bankrupt. A church leadership which drives against the will of its corporate membership will be disenfranchised and the church lose its witness. If the influence of materialism and humanism and more at work in the church than the Holy Spirit, the church loses its witness for Christ.

Several years ago Zairian church leaders began to say, "There is no longer a need for missionaries. Africans can do the work expatriate personnel have been doing. Since money will no longer be necessary to pay the salaries of missionaries, it should be sent to the African church to underwrite the work being done by Africans." Some western agencies have listed the names of Africans with those of expatriates serving as personnel of the agencies in the African church. Does this mean those agencies are paying the salaries of church leaders in Zaire either directly or indirectly? If this is true, as suggested by Mr. Mutombo-Mpanya, the question of a truly autonomous church existing unfettered by western sources is challenged. When one raises the specter of a leadership paid by sources outside the indigenous constituency, it opens a Pandora's box of problems of freedom and loyalty as well as disparity.

Mr. Mutombo-Mpanya states the average income of the people in the Mennonite area of service is about \$70 per year per person. Pastors receive \$40 per month or \$480 per year. There is marked disparity in this case. One can well imagine the feeling of low-income laymen in this situation. If top church leadership are receiving salaries commensurately higher from outside sources, a very real problem could develop. This poses another serious question: Can and will the indigenous Christian lay people of the church in Zaire pay the salaries of their own leaders? Will the leadership of the church in Zaire accept salaries which a truly autonomous Christian church can pay? Canon Carr made international news when he urged a five year moratorium on assistance from expatriate resources in money and personnel. What would have been the result? Canon Carr was not consistent when he asked for a half million dollars to establish an ecumenical church center in Nairobi.

It is hoped no offense will be taken at a statement which may need to be said. Too often some have thought it to be the sole

responsibility of the so-called "haves" to rehabilitate the "have nots." There is a heavy responsibility for assisting all peoples but it is a mutual task whether inside or outside of the same community. Someone put it brutally in these words, "If you want to live like the rest of the world lives and have what the rest of the world has, you must work like the rest of the world works." This is simple economics.

In some areas a mason will lay 70 concrete blocks a day compared to up to 500 blocks in other countries. There are instances in which workmen work a half day for a full day's pay. These same employees walk off at mid-day carrying mortar belonging to their employers in order to work on personal jobs during the rest of the day. Reports have been received that some church leaders are absent from their areas of responsibility as much as six months out of the year. In all these instances the church suffers. This is not a criticism but an effort to suggest possible causes of some problems. There are a large number of effective, conscientious, responsible, and dedicated Christians serving in task in church-related programs and projects as well as in government and business.

Recently a very dedicated and effective Christian educator was chosen as Minister of Education in his own province. A very capable Christian in serving the Zaire government in radio and television communications. Conscientious and able young Christians are preparing themselves in the fields of education, the ministry, medicine, and business. In the future these young people will be contributing to the development of their own nation. The hope for a truly autonomous and an effective Christian witness will rest in their hands.

It is important that the church in Africa develop a position in the political and cultural life in their own countries. Western agencies and missionaries are expatriates and have no political rights or privileges. This influence must come from the indigenous church leaders and lay people. The course of action must be founded on Christian principles and in the spirit of Christian concern and love.

It would seem more desirable for western agencies to limit support to specific programs in horticulture, education, church development, evangelism, medical work, and many other fields of service critically needed by the people. Funds sent for such programs should be monitored to assure they are used as designated. Practices of "creaming off parts or all of designated funds" and using them for other purposes in administration have been common among some leaders. A direct accounting may be offensive to some people but integrity and responsible administration are the only alternative which can replace it. Trust

is the reward of trustworthiness. The limiting of support to specific programs and projects, rather than including salaries and undesignated subsidies, will do much to insure the establishment of a truly indigenous and autonomous Christian church in Africa. The leadership of the church would be encouraged to respond to the lay constituency upon which they would depend.

There is an appreciable body of dedicated Christian lay people in the African church. These are the viable witness of the living Christ working in them and through them. They are the hope of the church in its struggle to survive as a dynamic and powerful force in a changing structure and world. The Christians of the world must listen to God the Father, witness to the saving grace which comes through Christ the Son, and follow the will of the Holy Spirit. Then and only then will the church be the church in all its glory and in his name. This hardly seems human but at least it could be divine.

Response #2

Max Ward Randall

Mr. Mutombo-Mpanya is to be commended for having prepared a meaningful case study of his own denomination in Zaire, and for observations to be carefully noted, out of the Mennonite Church development, that echo loudly missions problems, experiences, and lessons of churches, both in Zaire and other African countries. One could wish he had looked at other churches in Zaire as well as in other countries and that he might have given a word concerning the relationship between the Mennonite Church and the United Church of Christ in Zaire. Reflection on this relationship between the Mennonite Church and other evangelical churches to the United Church of Christ speaks to contemporary challenges in other African states.

The Congo Protestant Council, formed in 1925, came out of the Congo Continuation Committee created in 1911. Most mission societies within the Congo belonged to it. The CPC was Africanized about 1960. In 1970, its structure was radically changed, coming out of eight days of tense debate during which time such concerns as patriotism, paternalism, politics, national unity and neo-colonialism were hotly discussed. The result, in which 32 churches or missions voted in favor and 14 voted against, was that the CPC went out of existence and the United Church of Christ in Zaire was created. "The new church adopted a policy of neutrality with relation to all foreign religious movements, notably the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Council of Churches" (Kane 1971:365). In spite of this decision, a representative of the All Africa Council of Churches was there, and a few days later the general secretary of the WCC visited Mr. Bokeleale, Chairman of the new United Church of Christ.