

Do We Need A Christian 'Think Tank' Conference In Africa?

Rev. Yemi Ladipo

"Our ancient continent is now on the brink of disaster, hurtling towards the abyss of confrontation, caught in the grip of violence. Gone are the smiles, the joys of life." So says Edem Kodjo, former secretary general of the OAU.

To get a true picture of what is actually happening in Africa one has to rely on the secular press. The Church by and large is not addressing itself to the problems confronting the ordinary man in the street. No wonder unbelieving African intellectuals find it easy to dismiss the Church as an irrelevant foreign outfit which Africa can ill afford. While the Church in Africa continues to dissipate its limited resources and efforts on what people consider non-essentials, the common man looks among the politicians for a "promising messiah". Reflecting on the political and economic frustrations experienced by the everyday African, Peter Enaharo said:

By and large, we Africans look upon government rather as a father-figure. When things go wrong we are immediately at our wit's end ready to follow the latest messiah to the ends of the earth. His promises are new and so we think they are different; and because we believe they are different we swear they will work. The journey has often been a very short one. [1]

For the Church in Africa to earn the right to be listened to by the suffering masses, she must become what she is called to be, "The light of the world, the salt of the earth". Martin Lloyd Jones once said, "The glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first." John Stott underscores this idea when he observes: "The influence of Christians in a society depends on their being distinct, not identical." God is at work within His Church, seeking to renew its life and equip it for its mission as light and salt in the world.

In what specific ways might the Church in Africa be mobilized to tackle the continent's problems? The purpose of this essay is twofold, to consider some major issues confronting Africa today and to suggest a specific first step for the Church to take.

Major Issues Facing Africa Today

A catalogue of the major issues confronting Africa was made in an article entitled "A Continent Gone Wrong", in the 16 January 1984 issue of *Time*. This analysis of the "harsh facts and hard choices" confronting Africa today deserves a careful study by the Church. The article shows some areas where the African masses are hurting. As it happens, the Church is affected in each of these areas too. They include the following:

1. Ostentatious living by the privileged few, in the midst of abject poverty. As *Time* pointed out, "Even in the poorest African capitals, such as battle scarred Ndjama, Chad, government officials can be seen in convoys of Mercedes-Benz limousines, scattering cyclists

and pedestrians as they pass. Owning a Mercedes is so potent an African status symbol that in East Africa a Swahili word was coined to describe the elite that drive them: 'Wabenzi' — literally, men of the Mercedes-Benz." [2]

And what about the number of bishops among the 'Wabenzi'?

2. **Lack of genuine political freedom.** "'Uhuru', the Swahili clarion call for freedom from the European colonial powers, has brought independence but little liberty for millions of black Africans. The rallying cry, 'one man, one vote' has been transformed into reality but it has suffered an ironic distortion. Many Africans now have one vote but often it can be cast for only one man. . . . All too frequently, fledgling African democracies have become hostage to leaders intent solely on gaining and holding power." [3]

But how much real freedom do local congregations have in deciding before the Lord the right people to be their pastors or even bishops? Unspiritual leaders are often imposed on local churches and good pastors taken away from them with hardly any advance notice.

3. **Economically the picture is bleak,** because of rampant corruption (which has become a way of life), gross mismanagement, and uncontrolled population growth. Sub-Saharan Africa's population growth rate, at 2.9% annually, is the highest anywhere in the world.

Since the African Church has been described as the fastest growing church in the world (225 million according to Dr. David Barrett), a lot of the rampant corruption and gross mismanagement of Africa's resources is being perpetrated by those in Africa who call themselves Christian. New Christians are untaught about what it means to be Christian in their society.

4. **Continuation of tribal conflicts.** In the nations of Africa, tribalism has consistently undermined the best efforts at national development. Meanwhile in the

Church, tribal allegiance too often takes precedence over what the Bible teaches. Tribalism erodes the structure of Christian unity and encourages tolerance of inefficiency and immorality within the body of Christ. Instead of proclaiming "all one in Christ", individual Christians carry the flags of their tribes as their badge of honour and allegiance.

5. **Rapid urbanization.** Although it has been suggested that this process has hastened 'detrribalization', many African sociologists "see the phenomenon as a primary cause of social disintegration; young Africans in particular discard values and disciplines for an urban-centered culture of Coca Cola and transistor radios."

What a great opportunity for the churches in urban areas to provide an alternative lifestyle for the rootless young people that flock to African cities in search of wealth. Unfortunately many of our big city churches are too politicised and tribalised to be able respond to the crying need of the unsaved.

6. **The suffocating influence of foreign domination** in African affairs has made Africa a continent of beggars that survive on foreign handouts. As a Tanzanian academic said:

We are undergoing a second colonialization. . . .
Our present leaders are just like the old tribal chiefs who signed pacts with colonizers for a few beads. Friendship and military pacts are now penciled up in return for guns and/or cash loans. Africa is up for grabs.

It is no use blaming our stars, or the former colonial masters. Africans have over the years become the architects of their own misfortune. Africa's major achievement in the last three decades has been in

exchanging political independence for economic dependence on foreign powers. This is true not only of many African countries but also of many African churches and especially para-church organizations. The issue of moratorium, which provoked so much resentment from evangelical Christians when it was first raised a few years ago, deserves a fresh look. The African church will not come of age until it assumes the responsibility of finding African solutions to African problems, without the rich and powerful church from the West telling her the 'short-cuts' to achieve her objectives. Too often those short-cuts lead to cul-de-sacs. The dilemma of Africa and of the church in Africa is well summed up in the cartoon which appeared in a British newspaper. On a picture of an American five dollar bill were printed these words: "In God We Trust. All Others Must Provide U.S. Military Base Facilities."

The African Church must learn to trust God instead of perpetually depending on foreign funds.

7. African leaders holding on to power, long after they have ceased to be the voluntary choice of the people they rule. Apart from Presidents Senghor (Senegal) and Ahidjo (Cameroon), no other African elected leader has voluntarily relinquished power. In an article entitled "Why African Leaders Cling to Power", the leader of Uganda's opposition, Paul Ssemogerere, explained why:

The incumbent in crisis rules out the option of resignation or retirement out of real fear for himself. Not only does he fear to lose his high office and the accompanying material benefits; but he is not sure what his successors might do to him, given the considerable coercive powers he has concentrated in the office they might inherit, and given the contempt and wrath with which he has been treating his critics.[4]

What is true of political leaders is also true of many church leaders, who cling to leadership roles long after they were due for retirement. "African church leadership lags behind the reality of the African church

situation" a friend recently told me. One reason this is so is because some experienced church leaders consider everybody mortal but themselves. They are often so busy consolidating their grip on the local churches that they have no time to pour their lives into younger men to continue where they left off. The training of 'Timothys' to replace African 'Pauls' remains one of the most arduous tasks facing the Church today. The future of the Church in Africa cannot be built on 'the slippery slopes of permanent uncertainty.'

These issues the ordinary man on the street in Africa understands. But how seriously does the Church in Africa take them? What hope does the Church offer the Africans in facing these issues? Here and there one sees positive steps. The National Christian Council of Kenya has published A Christian View of Politics in Kenya. By giving a meaningful Biblical definition to Kenya's 'Nyayo' philosophy of 'love, peace and unity', the NCCK is helping Kenyan Christians to think right and act as 'the salt of the earth.' But it is only one step in the long journey needed if the Church is to become a positive influence in African affairs.

Why a Continental Think Tank Conference is Needed

The Church in Africa is potentially strong enough to bring about a change in the right direction. But first it must assume control over its destiny. Well-meaning non-Africans have demonstrated amazing willingness to help the African church. They seem to understand the African problems more than the African Christians themselves. They offer quick solutions without a full disclosure of their real motive. As Paul Ssemogerere has observed, African leaders have become "attractive and generous hosts to a mixed bag of the . . . mushrooming social engineers and policy analysts who in large measure come to Africa respectively to test their theories and work out strategies in international politics and economies from their points of view." [5]

What is true of our political leaders is also true of many of our church leaders. Their leadership style is defaulting because they rely too heavily on non-African 'experts' to do their jobs for them--chiefly because they do not have to pay for their services. And what is more, provided these 'experts' are given complete freedom to experiment with their theories, the local African churches will benefit from increasing inflow of money from the countries that sent the missionaries. Thus in Africa today not a few 'successful' evangelical leaders are nothing more than figureheads maintaining the 'white elephant' inherited from missionaries, with the continuing help and financial support of the 'offspring' of the pioneering missionaries of previous generations. In Africa an 'expert' is someone from a far away country.

I wish to propose that what the church in Africa needs as a matter of urgency just now is a continental Think Tank conference. We need such a gathering to achieve the following strategic goals.

1. To provide a forum for influential African Christian leaders to establish a 'priority order' on the felt needs of the Church in Africa.

Up to this point we have allowed our foreign benefactors to tell us what to concentrate on. African leaders give in once they are assured that funds will be raised for the projects by the friends of Africa in Europe and America. Top priority is often given to projects which in my view are not true reflections of the felt needs of the African church today. Many such projects would not be in existence if the bulk of the money were to come from the church in Africa. This is not because there is no money in Africa to fund the projects--but because the generality of the African church do not consider them to constitute 'top priority', so projects depend on foreign funds for their survival and would be closed tomorrow without them.

My comments must not be taken to mean that I do not appreciate the need for some of these projects in Africa. I do. The point I am trying to make is that their importance can be easily over-rated in the context of the present and future needs of the African church because they do not arise from a sense of priorities determined by African Christians. For example, it may be that a national conference center, that offers on-going training on different aspects of the Christian life for the clergy and lay people of the church, should be a higher priority in Africa than post graduate level residential theological colleges. What is more, such a conference center may be highly 'sellable' to the local churches.

The needs of the African church are very great but African Christian leaders must meet to establish how they are going to solve these problems with their limited resources. They must establish set criteria for any help from outside of the continent to prevent permanent dependency on foreign aid.

2. To provide an opportunity to discuss creative ways of meeting the vital needs of the African Church.

Instead of continuing to respond to external stimulus, the African Church must learn to consider creative ways of meeting her priority needs. The African leaders must demonstrate to the rest of the church universal that they accept full responsibility before the Lord of reaching their continent with the claims of Christ, without depending on external initiatives. Present benefactors of Africa must be encouraged to adopt the attitude of the Western diplomat who said recently: "We are going to see some difficult times ahead. We should try to help those who are doing most to help themselves, to create some success stories."

The image of the African church always carrying a 'begging bowl' must be corrected for the African church to live within its means. It must be willing if neces-

sary to take some steps backward in order to take a giant step forward. Dependence on foreign funds may seem a short cut to putting a project in orbit. But the history of missions has repeatedly shown that when the indigenous church assumes (or tries to assume) control of the project, often the church finds the project to be in the wrong orbit, with much energy and funds required to keep it there. The choice is often between crash-landing the project or continuing to keep the project in the wrong orbit with foreign funds and control. The latter choice seems to prevail in Africa.

3. To define the role of non-African missionaries in Africa and what foreign aid (if any) will be acceptable to the African Church.

The time has come for our foreign benefactors to "choose between remaining master in isolation and darkness, and giving up supremacy to find brotherhood."

Proposal

As general coordinator of Nigeria's National Congress on Evangelization from 1974 to 1979, I worked with a committee of Nigerian leaders to organize two major conferences to deal with specific issues facing Nigerian Christians. Issue papers were given by influential Christian leaders. And as honorary secretary of the Nigerian branch of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion from 1979 to 1982, I took part in organizing two national conferences to deal with issues peculiar to that church in Nigeria—using denominational clergymen as speakers. My desire to see an African Think-Tank Conference organized for influential African thinkers stems from the way I saw the NCE and the EFAC conferences help the church in Nigeria in 'equipping the saints for the work of the ministry'.

My proposal is that participants at such a conference must be influential Christian thinkers from across Africa. After establishing the needs of the African

church in order of priority, the first two or three needs could be tackled at the conference in committee. An outline for the issue papers on these two or three major needs could be approved by the whole conference. Then gifted, interested and qualified individuals should be assigned to write out a draft for each of the issue papers for field testing in different countries. Papers to be ratified must be written simply (but not simplistically), in such a way that they could be used as Bible study materials in local churches.

I am aware of the excellent plan of the East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology (EAJET) to produce a Handbook of African Evangelical Theology . As one of the consulting editors of EAJET, I endorse the process outlined in the briefing papers sent out by EAJET to its consultants. The Christian Think Tank conference I am proposing could help to put continental 'priority order' on the topics to be included in the Handbook. In fact, the immense problems facing Africa today need a two-pronged approach. The production of a Handbook of African Evangelical Theology is one approach. However, since the Church in Africa has lost its credibility to be taken seriously on matters of national interest (having too long been part of the problems), African Christian thinkers need to produce issue papers on matters in which the 'common man' has vested interest. It is my conviction therefore that the production of such apologetic papers on contemporary African issues should helpfully precede the publication of the Handbook, in order to demonstrate that the Church in Africa is committed to a 'holistic' lifestyle.

As the Think Tank gains continental and international credibility, it could be constituted into an African Institute of Contemporary Christianity, similar in purpose to that of the recently founded London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, which has as its stated goal "To help thoughtful Christians (especially graduates, professional and business people) to relate their Christian faith to every area of their responsibility--

their home, work, leisure, personal life and civic duties."

The continental Institute could give birth to regional and national institutes, with facilities for training pastors, politicians, students, business and professional people, in interpreting the Bible, understanding the modern world, living as Christian disciples, reaching out in mission, with management seminars, marriage seminars, stewardship seminars, and so forth.

I believe the bulk of the funding for holding the proposed Think Tank Conference can be met from within Africa, if the conference is considered a priority by the influential African thinkers to be invited. I think the idea of the conference needs to be 'floated' among African Christian leaders. It will be the responsibility of a small nucleus of interested leaders to consider how the expenses of the conference will be met and what kind of people to be invited. Needless to say, I am excited about the idea of the Think Tank Conference. The question I am asking myself now is whether anybody else is interested? Time will tell.

Notes

[1] Africa Now, January 1984, page 7.

[2] Time Magazine, 16 January, 1984

[3] Time

[4] Africa Now, January 1984

[5] Africa Now