

Leadership Training For Churches In Africa

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Introduction

There is a crisis of leadership in the Church in Africa today. At the root of this crisis is the vacuum which exists because the Church needs larger numbers of leaders of high calibre than are presently available within its fold. The situation was not always this grave. In the initial years of the establishment of Christianity in Africa, the African clergyman and the allied catechists and evangelists, were among the most highly respected men in their communities. His spiritual role, personal integrity and pronounced academic attainment, gave him an elevated social status which made him an opinion maker in the larger society.

It is now abundantly clear that although the churches in Africa started on a strong and promising foundation in the sphere of leadership, there has been deterioration in this respect with the passage of time. This is because of the process of stagnation which set in after the first generation of distinguished and outstanding Christian leaders. Commenting on this retrogressive development, Roland Oliver notes that

During the first three decades of the colonial period this had not been so. Of the first literate generation of East Africans the elite had become either chiefs or churchmen. But with the development of secondary education and with the widening of secular opportunities, the Churches began to be outpaced in the competition for the best educated men.¹

This is all the more deplorable when it is realised that whereas the Church has been standing still, the pace of overall development has been staggering, bringing with it earth-shaking adjustments at every level of society. In 1931, J.H. Oldham and B.D. Gibson noted that, "Dynamic forces are at work in Africa."² In the same vein, Roland Oliver pointed out in 1964 that, "In the political field the scene has changed since independence almost beyond recognition."³ At the same time, "The Churches, however, have undergone no such dramatic changes."⁴

The Church in Africa can ill-afford to remain out of step for long with the general trends on the continent and among its people. It augurs ill for the future of the Church if, remaining myopic to these developments, it fails to devise adequately the ways and means of grappling with this ever-shifting environment. It was in this light that Harry Sawyerr appealed for the Church to take cognizance of the prevalence of a rapidly shifting milieu. Commenting on this in 1961, he urged, "The Church must take steps to refurbish herself adequately well in order to keep abreast of the times and so to grasp the implications of any social problem which may arise."⁵

To achieve efficiency in its affairs, the Church in Africa needs to have among its leaders, those whose theological and ministerial preparation has equipped them well enough to shoulder effectively the responsibilities with which they are entrusted. As Harry Sawyerr has put it,

This means that the Church in Africa should endeavour to hold within the ranks of her Ministry men of the requisite standard of education and training who can stand cheek by jowl with the nuclear and theoretical physicists, the biochemists, the eminent jurists, economists, historians, sociologists and indeed the large host of specialists who are making their presence felt increasingly in Africa today, and will do so all the more in the future⁶

The Challenge Before Us

Among the key issues facing the Church in Africa today is the fact that those who are in its service at the moment are insufficient in numbers and in calibre for the tasks before them. This is a challenge which threatens the very existence

of the Church, and therefore, one which deserves the attention, not only of the Church in Africa, but also co-operation from churches in other parts of the world as well. If this challenge is not met adequately the Church faces the prospect of suffering irreparable damage. Writing on this matter in 1951, Roland Oliver lamented,

The danger is rather that, under the stress of political and social change, [Christianity] may start to disintegrate at the centre while it is still expanding at the circumference. There is a real possibility that a Church led by peasant priests may come to be increasingly spurned and ignored by the educated minority which will come in the future to exercise the greatest share of political power.⁷

This undesirable plight was noted in 1966 by Thomas Beetham as an agenda which needed to be taken up in dialogue between the churches in the West and the churches in Africa. Singling out developments at the university level, he observed, "We must take serious note of the picture of the gap between university students and their church leaders."⁸ When Roland Oliver revisited the topic of the ministry in 1964, he was disappointed with the progress, and pointed out that in the case of Protestant denominations, there was not a single African graduate in the ordained ministry, whereas in the 1950's and the early 1960's, "hundreds of East Africans have been studying in the universities of Europe, Asia and North America."⁹ Oliver concluded that the central concern before the church was how to produce an educated clergy:

And yet there is a vital question about the Churches' leadership, which I posed in the final chapter of this book, and to which, so far as I am aware, no reassuring answer can yet be given. It concerns the utter failure of the Churches, ever since the 1920's, to attract into the Christian ministry even a handful of the best educated East Africans.¹⁰

Proposed Course of Action

In view of the fact that the Church in Africa suffers from a shortage in numbers and quality of leaders with the requisite theological and ministerial competence,

the task of righting this acute situation is extremely urgent. The time has come when it is imperative that priority attention should be given to identifying, recruiting, and training those who will be mobilised for and channelled into the service of the Church. We must wage a concerted campaign to net young men who combine Christian commitment and zeal with the calling, propensity, and potential for theological and ministerial leadership in the Church. In the words of Harry Sawyerr,

The Church should think out a bold and vigorous programme of recruitment and training for the Ministry, coupled with plans for attracting men of the highest calibre...The Church should indeed make this task their chief primary concern now, even now and at all times. Laity and clerics alike should make this task the heaviest burden on their heart.¹¹

There is some rationale for pursuing deliberate and conscious steps to train the top cadre of those who will serve the theological and ecclesiastical leadership of the Church in Africa today. Focusing attention on a select target group of those with distinctive abilities will ensure that a particular category of leaders has been prepared to help steer the Church in its affairs.

In 1950, at the conference of the Inter-Seminary Movement, at Rock Island, Illinois, Elton Trueblood discovered the full import of this truth. In an address to the delegates, Stephen Neill stressed the importance of having within the church, a cadre of leaders who are well-suited to equip the rest of the members for effective service. In the words of Trueblood,

The most memorable address was that of Bishop Stephen Neill. From his lips I heard at Rock Island for the first time in my life the phrase, "the equipping ministry." We realized instantly, as we heard his fresh interpretation of Ephesians 4:12, that we were listening to a conception which can give unity to all of the ministry in which we are engaged. The central idea of the new emphasis is that the characteristic Christian ministry is that of enabling other people in their ministry, and equipping them to perform it. The purpose of God's gifts to pastors and teachers, we are told, is "to equip God's people for work in his

service." This means that if a person is a Christian at all, he is to be, in some sense, a minister, but he is not likely to be fully effective in his ministry unless there are some persons who are dedicated to its guidance and enrichment.¹²

These sentiments are parallel to those which W.E.B. DuBois held with regard to the need for enlightened leadership among the African-American people. Concerned about their plight, together with the need for strong leadership among them, he outlined some corrective measures. In his view, the key to the whole enterprise was the training of the talented tenth of the people. He argued,

How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few strengthened? There can be but one answer: The best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land. All men cannot go to college but some must: every isolated group or nation must have its yeast, must have the talented few [in] centers of training where men are not so mystified and befuddled by the hard necessary toil of earning a living, as to have no aims higher than their bellies, and no God greater than Gold.¹³

Among the pointers to the solution, DuBois envisaged the springing up of "colleges and college-bred men; not a quantity of such colleges, but a few of excellent quality; not too many college-bred men, but enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses, to raise the Talented Tenth to leadership."¹⁴ In its own way, the Church in Africa can meet its objectives in the sphere of theological and ecclesiastical training of its leadership by emulating some of these measures.

There is a need to cultivate and maintain in the Church a cadre of able leaders who are comprehensively suited for the Christian ministry in Africa. Equipping them with a high standard of education is part of the invaluable equation which will help engender a measure of competence and capability. This is imperative, because now, more than ever before, there is a crying need for deeply committed Christians who combine fervent devotion to Jesus Christ, with the relevant high level of academic attainment. As in other fields of endeavour, the Church should carry out a determined and sustained programme

of training a select number of those whose high potential and aptitude for leadership singles them out as best suited to steer and guide the Church in its varied affairs.

Maintenance and Cultivation of Existing Patterns

It needs to be underscored that whatever other categories of theological and ecclesiastical leadership training the Church in Africa undertakes, this should not be conducted at the expense of the grass roots level which has served the Church commendably from its initial years in Africa. The preparation which is envisaged should not be misconstrued so much as a substitute for, but rather, as an addition to prevailing patterns. In these basic categories, the Church in Africa is served by a host of self-giving Christians who combine singleness of purpose with bold and imaginative approaches to Christian work. It is largely through their efforts that the admirable traits of the Church in Africa today have become the talk and envy of the rest of Christendom.

To begin with, there is need to continue with and to strengthen the ongoing informal programmes for Christian nurture and overall general leadership training. Through this channel, the Church has constantly gained natural leaders who continue to serve as its backbone from generation to generation. Then there is the training of evangelists-cum-catechists for primary evangelism as well as for foundational church-planting endeavours. When an enlightened assessment of the role of the class of evangelist-catechists in the establishment of Christianity in Africa is made, it is clear that they are comparable to the worker bees who shoulder the greatest responsibility for the primary tasks of the Church. There is a sense in which this group of church workers will always remain an indispensable part of the Church. This being the case, their retention in the system, and the training thereof will always be a matter of priority concern for the Church.

As a complementary activity in the sphere of theological and ecclesiastical leadership training, it is imperative that well-organized, occasional, formal sessions of varying duration and varied levels be incorporated in the plans of the Church. For those who have already been trained, these will serve as much-needed refresher courses. For the others, this may be an avenue which introduces them to new vistas of equipment for the service of the Church.

In addition to the categories and steps outlined above, the prevalent long-time options should be encouraged and promoted. These relate to work carried out in existing Bible schools, institutes, and colleges. Whether they are denominational, interdenominational or non-denominational, generally, these are purely church-based and normally do not have secular government accreditation for their programmes. They are so central and will continue to be so pivotal to foundational theological and ecclesiastical leadership training for the Church in Africa that it would be detrimental to the Church's welfare to underestimate their lasting contribution. While some award certificates and diplomas, others have established themselves as degree-granting institutions.

The truth of the matter is that ongoing informal programmes, preparing of evangelists-cum-catechists, occasional and regular seminars, and long-term institutionalized schemes, are all measures which presuppose the existence of yet a higher category of leaders. These are those who will look into all the aspects of the Church's welfare, and from that standpoint, initiate and direct those leadership schemes which are calculated to ensure its efficiency. Their endowment, abilities, and training should in turn, be such as to point to the fact that they are equal to the task of guiding and steering the Church in the totality of its affairs.

The Educational and Academic Criteria for the Select Category

The priority level of theological education to be attained by the top leadership of the Church will vary from one African country to another. All the same, two guiding principles will be useful in this direction. First, it would be advisable to consider what the average level of education of the leadership in the general society is in a given country. In the second instance, the people in question should acquire in some sense, the broadly agreed upon standard of competence in theological education on a world-wide scale. As a member of the universal Church, the African Christian leader cannot isolate himself from global stipulations, however loosely defined these may be. Yet, as a leader of a community in his own local society he needs to be true to the demands and requirements of his particular milieu.

This being the case, the people going into the select leadership of the Church should be those who have a broad basis of general knowledge as provided for in

the appropriate public educational process of their respective countries. This background will have prepared them in a sound manner by equipping them even to undertake comprehensive theological studies with minimal difficulties and optimum understanding. At this level, it is possible to be innovative and creative by benefitting from a variety of theological experiences without swallowing them wholesale and mimicking patterns borrowed from different contexts.

Identifying, recruiting, and enlisting of would-be Church leaders are key ingredients to the success of the desired theological and ecclesiastical training. There is a head-start where these take into account a deep-seated commitment to Christ and a clear-cut call to Christian service. When due care is taken in this matter, it means that a strong foundation has been laid for the entire process which is to be pursued later. This is especially true in the case of the high category of Christian leaders where integrity is a premium. In many cases, many weaknesses which surface in the course of service in Christian work are traceable to the fact that due care was not taken at the preliminary level of identification, recruitment, and enlistment of Church leaders. Thoroughness in selection gave way to need-dictated expediency.

Once identified, recruited, and enlisted in Christian service, those being prepared for theological and ecclesiastical leadership require adequate direction, guidance, and moral support at the all-important training stage. Without being overbearing in this role, it is possible for those who are charged with the task of shaping the destiny of the Church to help the selected candidate to choose and chart the course of his studies to the mutual benefit of the Church and the individual. More often than not, the executors of training schemes are not aware of, let alone involved in, the detailed programme and schedule of the student. Discrepancy crops up when it is realised too late that the aspirations and achievements of the scholar are at cross-purpose with the assumptions and inclinations of the hierarchy of the churches.

Possible Target Groups for Training in Advanced Leadership

The ideal situation is one where graduates of local African universities are tapped for the Christian ministry. Following their recruitment and acceptance, they should be channelled to institutions where they can attain the necessary

advanced theological knowledge. This target group of people should be taken seriously in that, despite their respectable academic status through association with the local educational system, this category of prospective Church leaders has suffered neglect and has received least attention from the Church. When they combine fervent commitment to Jesus Christ and a deep sense of call to the Christian ministry, and when they meet all the other spiritual criteria which Christian work requires, they serve as a vital source for the requisite select leadership in the theological and ecclesiastical arena of the Church in Africa today. With their commitment to Jesus Christ and their call to the Christian ministry assured, what is needed is to set up a mechanism by which to identify and select suitable individuals for the relevant theological and ecclesiastical training.

It must be conceded that it should not be assumed that those who have gone systematically through the regular educational process have a monopoly on capacity and aptitude for advanced theological studies and the related select leadership roles in the Church that we have outlined. Among the most astute theological and ecclesiastical leaders of the Church in Africa, even today, are those whose innate intellectual faculties have been stimulated to the highest levels when they have been afforded academic opportunities which they had missed earlier when their educational journey was interrupted in their formative years. With this in view, in addition to regular university graduates, three other categories need to be considered for the projected special leadership training. First, there are those capable and practising leaders with unique aptitude for Christian scholarship. Secondly, Christians in different professions who feel drawn to Christian work are another group. Then there are exceptional and outstanding Bible college graduates who have proved to be a valuable source over the years.

Concluding Remarks

The question which next comes to mind is one which has vexed Christian leaders in Western European nations and in the Third World alike. This has to do with the geographical location of the proposed advanced theological and ecclesiastical studies for the select group of leaders.

Whether Third World Christian leaders should be restricted and confined to training in theological institutions in their own countries and natural environment is an issue which will continue to be debated upon for generations to come. Whichever way the debate goes, it must be kept in view that the key is to equip quality leadership for the Church in Africa with relevant theological and ecclesiastical tools in doctrinally sound and academically reputable institutions of higher learning.

The challenge before us is an African problem whose solution should engage the minds and resources of Christians in Africa. But the Church in Africa cannot work out the required answers in isolation. These must be sought for in the context of collaboration, partnership, and co-operation with churches in other parts of the world. Touching on collaboration, J.H. Oldham and B.D. Gibson once wrote: "We believe that there are hundreds of persons in Africa, in Europe and in America, who would be heartened and fortified in their work by the knowledge that they are associated with others in an endeavour to think out together how the largest Christian service may be rendered to the African race."¹⁵

It was the African political theoretician and practical revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973) who said, "I am a simple African man, doing my duty in my own country in the context of our time."¹⁶ On the issue before us, the decision makers in the churches in Africa may need to borrow a leaf from Cabral with all of his practical idealism. At the same time, there may be need to summon aid from other quarters as with Winston Churchill in his memorable words, "Give us the tools, and we will finish the task."

Endnotes

¹ Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longmans, 1966), p. x.

² J.H. Oldham and B.D. Gibson, *The Remaking of Man in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 13.

³ Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor*, p. ix.

⁴ Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor*, p. x.

⁵Harry Sawyerr, "The Church and the State," in *Christian Theology in Independent Africa*, edited by Harry Sawyerr, (Fourah Bay College: The Aureol Pamphlets, 1961), p. 7.

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor*, pp. 291-292.

⁸Thomas A. Beetham, "The Future of Christian Education in Africa," in *Christianity and African Education*, R. Pierce Beaver, ed. (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1966), p. 216.

⁹Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor*, p. ix.

¹⁰Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor*, p. x.

¹¹Harry Sawyerr, "The Church and the State," p. 8.

¹²Elton Trueblood, *While It Is Day*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 92-93.

¹³W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in Herbert Aptheker, ed. *Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois in Non-periodical Literature Edited by Others* (New York: Krens-Thomas Organization Limited, 1982), p. 20.

¹⁴Ibid., W.E.B. Du Bois, p. 26.

¹⁵J.H. Oldman and B.D. Gibson, *The Remaking of Man in Africa*, p. 15.

¹⁶Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Writings* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 2.