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A look into the future: What will Africa and the church look like in 20 years response

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2 | A Response to **A Look into the Future: What Will Africa and the Church Look Like in 20 Years?**

Gorden R. Doss

Thank you, Dr. Owuso Antwi, for your insightful paper. I wish to interact with your paper by sharing seven points that grow out of my time in Malawi. As a preface to the main points, my observation is that, as a group, our brothers and sisters in Africa are very resourceful, resilient, and committed. When we speak of the need for self-sufficiency we are not implying that they have none but that their self-sufficiency needs to be enhanced for the sake of God's wholistic mission to the world.

First, the hard truth is that the Adventist Church in Africa functions within a larger economic environment which is generally troubled. When there is a recession in America we hear of hiring freezes, withholding of salary increases, and other economizing measures in the conferences. When I hear North American church leaders bemoaning financial pressures I think of how much more intense those pressures are in the Malawi Union, where I grew up and worked. Yet, we would be wrong to throw up our hands in despair over the situation in Africa. At the First Adventist Mission in Africa Conference, Dr. Tite Tiénou warned us against "Afro pessimism." We should remember that the Early Church was not wealthy and that church history is full of amazing things done by believers in the context of poverty. One of the leadership challenges for Adventist mission in Africa is to combat the general hopelessness and helplessness that undermines self-reliance.

Second, one of our realities is that the Adventist Church in Africa functions on different economic scales. On one hand, average church members, whose tithe and offerings support the Church, live on a lower, "third

world” economic scale. On the other hand, the Church in Africa needs to interact with the economic “first world” as part of the world Church. This means that we need well-trained pastors who are content to serve rural districts in isolated places and also pastors who relate well with the educated elite and the world Church. Financial realities preclude having a single educational level for pastors because the better educated are often unwilling to serve the bush districts and the less educated are unable to serve the educated elite and the world Church. One of the ways to address the problem of over-sized districts is with pastoral training programs for those who may lack the qualifications for higher education but who would serve well in rural districts. Local churches would be better served by pastors with a two-year ministerial education than by untrained local church elders. We surely wish for an adequate number of pastors who all have their BA in theology degree or even higher education. However, financial realities suggest we need an interim plan while waiting for economies to improve. Another solution would be to offer structured church elder training programs. In summary, the model I am suggesting is composed of three types of education: post-secondary school, BA pastoral education; post-10th grade, two-year ministerial training; and structured local church elder training, with certification.

Third, self-reliance in the church is only valuable when it benefits the mission of the church. Today, sub-Saharan Africa is one of the best evangelized parts of the world, with about a third of all Adventists. African Adventists need to become self-reliant so that their own tithes and offerings added to those of the world Church can support expanded mission to the 10/40 Window where millions have yet to be evangelized. Mission has always moved on the wheels of self-sacrifice and Adventists in Africa need to be led to commit their all for the sake of the unevangelized. A century ago Adventists were sacrificing to evangelize Africa. Today the unevangelized masses inside and outside Africa need the human and material resources of our whole Church.

Fourth, the discussion of self-reliance in missions has been around for a long time. Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, leading mission statesmen of the nineteenth century, promoted a “three-self theory” for developing indigenous churches. Churches should become self-governing,

self-propagating, and self-supporting, they said. In spite of that emphasis the disparity of wealth between the historically missionary sending nations and the missionary receiving nations has tended to perpetuate financial dependency. A wholistic approach to missions also ironically tends to perpetuate dependency as wealthier believers want to lend material support to poorer believers. Even though Adventists in Africa now outnumber those in the nations which originally sent missionaries to Africa, the attitude of being receivers persists. Some Christian groups have taken the bold step of refusing aid from outside Africa but most have accepted it willingly and wished for more. We need to be fair to ourselves because Adventist stewardship in Africa is often admired by other Christian groups. However, that does not relieve us of the need to bring about change in a church culture that tends toward dependency.

Fifth, the Pauline theology of the church as the body of Christ (Eph 4:12) teaches that the various segments of the church must always be a sharing community. Paul collected gifts from the wealthier Gentile churches for the poorer believers in Jerusalem. However, belonging to such a community places constraints on both the more wealthy and less wealthy members of the body. The less wealthy have the same obligation as the more wealthy to be faithful stewards in proportion to what they have. The more wealthy must share in a way that does the best good for God's mission in the contexts of the poorer members. An objective look at our beloved Church in this century may suggest that both the more wealthy and less wealthy Adventists have things to learn. I fear that some of the ways funds are used, with the intention of promoting missions in Africa, are most effective in providing interesting trips and experiences for wealthier Adventists. On the other hand, faithful stewardship is lacking among some Adventist groups in Africa who think of the Church as a *source* of money rather than a *receiver* of money. Unhealthy relationships can develop within the body of Christ where the poor are manipulative toward the wealthy and the wealthy are paternalistic toward the poor. Part of developing self-reliance in Africa will involve strategically planning and managing interactions with well-intentioned visitors from outside the continent.

Sixth, we must not assume that we understand the reasons our own

people persist in dependency. Thirty-four church leaders in the West-Central Africa Division recently completed their Doctor of Ministry degrees from Andrews University. One of their shared testimonies was that when they did a detailed cultural analysis of their own people, they realized how much more they needed to learn about them. Africa is a large, dynamic continent, with many different cultures. As the Adventist Church culture has been planted within these many diverse cultures, the result has been the formation of sub-cultures that differ from each other in certain ways. The Church in some places is more self-reliant and in others less so. In the discipline of missiology we study worldviews which are the deepest factors of culture that drive what people think, feel, and do. To change our internal church culture we will need to study the larger cultures around us and how they have fused with our Adventist culture to produce particular perspectives on self-reliance that we wish to modify. We need to develop a research mentality to our work that will inform good leadership. Self-reliance has to be based on deep knowledge.

Finally, the paper's church membership projections were fascinating to consider. There is a process underway that might alter the projections in some ways. The General Conference has been encouraging the divisions to audit church membership figures carefully and some of that has already happened in Africa. One division on another continent has conducted a rigorous audit that resulted in decreasing their membership numbers by over one million. The numbers were there as accumulations of baptismal reports but many names behind the numbers were missing. Although the audit was bitter medicine to swallow in some ways it promoted the mission of the Church in that division. For example, prior to the audit unused Sabbath Schools Study Guides were piling up in warehouses because they were being printed for inflated membership numbers. Once the numbers were based on actual member names in well-maintained local church clerk records the division was able to better plan and strategize in many ways. I believe that the careful stewardship of membership will undergird and promote self-reliance in Africa in many ways.