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## IDENTITY IN CHRIST IN A GLOBAL CHURCH

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### Introduction

Ayi Kwei Armah in his novel, 'The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born' makes an intriguing statement, "The poor are rich in patience." The novel is a satirical analysis of the monotony that characterizes the life of Ghanaians after independence. He describes how patience is an unconscious and often a useless weapon of the poor against the situation of chaos fuelled by corruption and abuse of power in everyday life. He illustrates this with a narration of an incident where a tout of a public transport bus holds his passengers ransom with his careless mannerism. What this illustrates is that power, advantage, dominance and monopoly does not allow for a level playing field.

Perhaps we can learn something from this secular African writer. We are now at a point in history where the global North is not only a sender of Christian missionaries but also a receiver, and the church in the global South has moved on from being merely a recipient of missionaries to becoming senders as well.

Today, we could cite examples of situations where due to years of some Western missionaries being patronising and domineering in the mission fields, contributions of those from the global South have been practically ignored. The failure for these marginalised believers to aggressively make their voices heard could easily be mistaken for them being unprepared to contribute to mission in the global church. However, this may simply be a case of "the poor being rich in patience."

I believe that God's mission demands a stepping out in faith and every step of faith is not devoid of risks. Those who fear that the church in the global South is too naïve or shallow to engage in world mission, or that they can't cope with the rigours of the rational thinking of Western society must have deliberately forgotten that, salvation in Christ Jesus is by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). It is time for Christ's church to arise as one people, serving one God who is creator and Lord of the universe, to proclaim the good news of Jesus to those who are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12c). Yes, of course there are still

many people who need to know the saving power of Christ in the global South and so missionaries from the West have to continue to go to Africa, Latin America and Asia. However, we have to humbly admit that, similarly, there are many in the Western nations who still do not know Christ, and Western Christians must be willing to welcome missionaries from the global South to join them in participating in God's mission despite the hurdles that exist.

The above comments can make uneasy reading for some. This could partly be because Western missionaries have suffered a host of negative experiences in dealing with believers from the global South to a point where they have lost hope that equality is viable. But we can only make progress in the global church through honest dialogue and careful discernment. We must remain committed to the teachings of Scripture that affirm that those who are in Christ Jesus, have "received the Spirit of sonship" (Rom 8:15b) and are "members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." (Eph 3:6).

Allow me therefore to make some comments about the changing face of what it means to be a Christian in a globalised world. In order to do this, I will explore problem areas and make suggestions of how we can possibly overcome these hurdles.

## **Understanding The Context**

- Identity

The term 'identity' has several uses. In psychological circles it refers to one's self-awareness or self-image whereas in sociological circles it has to do with one's experience. In other words, identity could take either a personal dimension that describes the uniqueness of a person or a group dimension that describes how a person can be part of a social group. A follower of Jesus derives their identity from Christ. This means that our identity in Christ in the global church has consequences on both personal discipleship as well as ecclesiastical practice.

- Expectations

What Are the Western Expectations On Non-Western People

There are likely to be stereotypical expectations in aspects such as time-keeping, difficulties in adjusting to the weather, and if they are preachers, eternal sermons etc. On the other hand for those who will have had effective ministries in their home countries there will be high expectations of a messiah-type figure who will bring about instant results. In evangelical circles of course their theology will be carefully scrutinised.

- What Are the Non-Western Expectations of Western Christians

Many will expect Western Christians to be materially well off and hence generous in their giving to support mission work. They will also expect people to gladly offer them hospitality in their homes and receive them joyfully as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. If nothing else, they will expect to be listened to and for their hosts to take genuine interest in them. They will expect Western Christians to show a greater separation from the things of this world by not drinking alcohol and certainly not smoking.

- Assumptions

The expectations listed above obviously are fairly general statements that would not necessarily describe every single scenario in cross-cultural mission. However they are pointers to the fact that in the global church there will be several ways of looking at the same situation. The main point to be noted is that views, suggestions and feelings of those from the global South need to be respected in mission dialogues.

There is still a small minority who think that the Western world is predominantly Christian and especially those who come from places where there are still significant numbers of western missionaries. However, it is safe to say that the majority of the world now understands the existence of a great spiritual darkness in the West.

### **Overcoming The Hurdles**

- Equality and friendship

The global church is in dire need for equality and greater friendship among believers. Church growth scholars have suggested that homogenous churches grow faster because it takes less effort to become a Christian and not cross language, ethnic or even class barriers. Even though this makes sense when viewed at face value, it negates New Testament teaching that the church is a new community made up of a new humanity in Christ. This is the opposite of homogeneity which enhances preservation of cultural differences and hence racial segregation. This leads to the further danger of fostering attitudes that are exclusive and that could promote cultural superiority. As our local areas become more and more multicultural, the church must intentionally demonstrate that the cross of Christ has broken down all the barriers that came about as result of sin, for example segregation.

- The need for change

There is need for the West to understand the need for change to be Christ-like rather than western-like:

a. To be biblical – We can learn from the New Testament church in Acts 10, Ephesians 2 and Galatians 3:26-28, as well as from the eschatological church in Revelation 7:9-10 what God's intention for the church is. It is that people from all types of backgrounds can worship Him united in spirit and in truth. To do this, we must relegate cultural practices and preferences from occupying centre stage in church life and seek instead to enhance the unity in the faith.

This may even apply to our preaching style and interpretation of the Scriptures. Is there a possibility that we as evangelicals have become too prescriptive and selective in the way we want the gospel message presented?

b. To embrace cultural diversity – there is need to ensure that people who are different from us and are part of our churches sense that they belong. This may have to include educating those in our churches on how to build friendships with people from other cultures.

c. To build sustainable models – We must give careful thought to the practical challenges of transiting existing churches from being monocultural to multicultural. We also need to carry out a reality check to determine whether we are intentional enough in making this happen. Many British Christians are fairly friendly. The challenge however for many is to

move things beyond the initial contact in order to build strong friendships and therefore integrate the 'outsider' into church life. We must remember that these 'outsiders' are real people with feelings, ambitions and an intellect even if they don't speak good English. Although some are asylum seekers, they could also be professionals in their own right and have the potential to offer valuable input into church life.

d. To be intentional – We must acknowledge the huge changes that many have undergone in order to accept the fact that global mission is from anywhere to everywhere. This is something we must truly be thankful to God for. Next of course is to intentionally, as hosts, take the initiative to make this experience in our churches and mission organisations a reality. This is particularly critical in places where we are surrounded by people who are different from us ethically, denominationally, culturally, age-wise etc.

- What Must We Do?

a. Change our attitude – confront patronising and racist attitudes.

b. Be inclusive – leadership, worship and social events should be inclusive and give everyone a chance to participate by contributing something to the life of the church.

c. Work hard – for it is not easy to swim against the current. People tend to resist change. We must not give up though.

d. Love sincerely – we must develop a sincere interest in each other for the Bible teaches us that, "love must be sincere" (Rom 12:9a).

e. Be filled with the Holy Spirit – People who submit to the Lordship and guidance of God's Spirit will be learners willing to be formed into the likeness of Christ. This is a necessity if we are to venture into new territories where the Spirit of God is leading the church. This journey requires discernment in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

## **Conclusion**

People who leave their home countries and become part of what we call the diaspora community, will more often than not undergo and an identity crisis as they remember the past and try and adapt to the new.

In mission circles, faith in Christ also leads to a redefined identity where the old goes and the new comes (2Cor 5:17). Even though one has a nationality and belongs to a particular ethnicity from which they derive their identity, by becoming a believer, the diaspora experience begins. They gain a dual citizenship and a dual belonging. Paul writing to the Galatians reminds them that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28). This suggests that racial, economic, social and gender differences are inconsequential in light of what Jesus Christ has accomplished through His death and resurrection. We too, must ensure that these do not become a hindrance as we work together with people from different cultural backgrounds in order that we can embrace each other in genuine love modelled on the pattern presented to us in the Scriptures. For Christ has freed us to be free with each other.

The two key words, in my view, in this discussion of a redefined identity in the global church are 'intentionality' and 'love'.

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#### Discussion Questions

1. For churches and mission organisations that work in multicultural contexts, how should its leadership reflect the multicultural dimension of the work and why?
2. It has been said that it is hard to transit a monocultural church into a multicultural church even in areas that are multicultural. Should we give up on building multicultural churches and multicultural mission teams? If not, what should be done?
3. Do we need to listen to the voice of Christians from the global South and if so, what can we intentionally do to ensure this is happening here in the UK?