

MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH

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Introduction

The word “leader” is used to describe a variety of roles in modern Africa. The Anglicism “*le leader*” is commonly heard even in Francophone countries. For the purposes of the present discussion, we define a missional leader as a person God has called to provide direction to a group or movement to accomplish His plan and purpose. Such leaders often are the key to advancing (or impeding) the work of God in a given context. As someone once quipped, “There are no bad churches, only bad leaders.” Hence, this article seeks to discuss the role of leaders in accomplishing God’s mission in and through the Church in Africa. While Africa is its focus, the issues I discuss may well be relevant in other majority world contexts.

The Church's Mission

In defining the Church's mission it is important to keep in mind God's plan for the salvation of humankind, because the Church's mission certainly is not different from that of its divine head. From the moment our first parents rebelled against God, His mission has been one of reconciliation. He promised a Seed to Eve (Genesis 3:15). He promised an Heir to Abraham (Genesis 15:4). He promised a Dynasty to David (2 Samuel 7:11). The ultimate manifestation of that Seed, that Heir and that Dynasty was Jesus of Nazareth. God sent His own Son into the world to save it from sin and destruction (John 3:17) and to reconcile to himself all things (Colossians 1:20). Before returning to heaven, Jesus passed on that same mission to his followers (John 20:21), calling them to make disciples of all ethnic groups on the planet (Matthew 28:19, 20). Indeed, God's eschatological vision consists of the uniting of all nations, tribes, races and languages before His throne (Revelation 7:9).

Therefore, God has called the Church to continue Christ's terrestrial mission. The Church is to reach out to all ethnic groups, wherever they may be found, and spread His Kingdom throughout the planet by bringing the message of reconciliation between God and humankind and between the peoples of the earth with a Christ-like concern for the whole person, body and soul. While this mission should be the "obsession" of every church leader, many today appear content merely to manage the internal affairs of their congregation or denomination.

Leaders of Missional Engagement

“If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15:14). Jesus’ statement brings to mind the leadership of many of our local congregations. It also explains the stagnation, schisms, and conflicts that infect numerous African churches. For good or for evil, churches reflect their leader’s vision and character.

Vision

Without a positive vision, progress is impossible because progress is vision made real. Healthy churches and movements have leaders filled with healthy vision; leaders who see the world as God sees it. They are passionate about the salvation of the nations. Visionless leadership is keeping the African Church from becoming a truly missional Church, that is, a Church wholly engaged in God’s mission in the world.

The evolution of the African Church can be described in three stages: 1) foundation, 2) consolidation, and 3) stagnation. Western missionaries played a central role in founding the African churches. National pioneers consolidated the work and built up these young communities. Then, in many places, those who were to assure her continued expansion, for the most part, have fallen into the trap of routine maintenance. This lack of vision has resulted in stagnation as leaders have degenerated into managers who often do little more than service a secular-like, administrative machine.

To guide African churches in obedience to the last instructions of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1:6-8), their leaders must shed the tyranny of the routine and clothe themselves in missional vision. Only then will they be able to guide the Lord’s flock to reach out to the ends of the earth.

Character

Missional vision alone is not enough. African Church leaders must also be people of character. Without godly character it is impossible to lead the Church to accomplish God's mission. From the point of view of character, we can distinguish three types of leaders who powerfully influence the mission of the Church.

Stagnant leaders.

Many contemporary African Church leaders are merely maintaining the status quo. They lack the courage and conviction to lead. They love comfort and conventionality. They are unwilling to take risks. Hence, they constitute a barrier to the Church's expansion. Now, managerial leadership in itself is not a bad thing. Our God is not a God of disorder. However, any ecclesiastical administration that does not advance the holistic expansion of God's Kingdom fails in its primary mission. Effective administration facilitates mission and evangelism.

Authoritarian leaders.

Authoritarian leaders have a worldly mindset and impose a secular-type administration. They are preoccupied with position and power. They love to command, sanction and reprove. They slip easily into conflicts of all sorts. Many African Church leaders fall into this category. They, too, represent an impediment to the expansion of the Church because they are fundamentally egocentric rather than mission-centric.

Facilitating leaders.

Facilitating leaders find ways to develop missional churches. They are like football coaches who help their players win on the field. They use their teaching, conduct, and administration to empower Christians to get involved in the expansion of

God's Kingdom. They embrace positive change and collaborate with God in accomplishing His mission on earth. These are the Church leaders that Africa needs.

Suggestions for Missional Involvement

In keeping with our understanding of God's mission on planet Earth, we suggest the following deliberate steps toward greater missional involvement on the part of the African Church. Our first set of recommendations is directed toward existing Church leaders; our second speaks to the equipping of new leaders.

Existing Church Leaders

If the African Church is ever to become a missionary force, its leaders must grow in their understanding of missional leadership. First, they need to cultivate a healthy vision. All progress begins with vision. Only as our leaders embrace God's vision for the world will they lead their churches to engage in the battle for the holistic salvation of all humankind.

Second, they must learn to function as facilitators rather than dictators. Only as they share responsibility, encourage up-and-coming leaders and mobilize the whole Church of God can they hope to see the whole world reached for Christ.

Third, they must accept all positive change. Effective leaders listen to others and welcome innovative approaches to accomplishing God's mission for the Church.

Fourth, they should devote spiritual, material, financial, and human resources to the cause of reaching the world for Christ. Africans can and should develop their own ways of doing mission that utilize local resources. Imitating Western approaches will only further delay Africa's involvement. The African Church must offer its pirogues, bicycles, and feet to the worldwide cause of Christ.

Fifth, they should step out in faith. True faith involves risk. If we attempt great things for God, we will receive great things from Him. The African Church cannot wait until all needed resources are identified. Rather, its leaders must start with the resources at hand and trust God to supply the rest.

Sixth, they should cultivate strategic partnerships. The Great Commission is too large a task to be undertaken independently. African Church leadership should look first to potential partners on the African continent before casting its eyes toward the West. In any case, the watchword is *interdependence* because with the mutual sharing of resources, the capacities of the one will make up for the deficiencies of the other.

New Church Leaders

Africa's Bible schools and theological colleges harbor great potential for influencing the direction and ministry of the Church. Church leaders put into practice the values and beliefs they adopt while in seminary. Hence, it is imperative a vision for missional involvement be an integral part of equipping the Church's future leaders. Unfortunately, training in mission is a low priority in many of Africa's theological schools. We suggest the following initiatives as a practical approach to correcting this deficiency.

First, theological colleges should give mission a greater place in the school's curriculum. The typical approach of dedicating only one course to this discipline within a three or four year course of study is simply insufficient. The various aspects of missional ministry should be given a weight similar to that of biblical studies, systematic theology, and Church history.

Second, theological colleges should encourage and facilitate practical involvement in mission and evangelism as a regular part of the curriculum. This joining of theory to practice is essential to instilling in future leaders a vision for missional involvement.

Third, theological colleges should recruit and train instructors who promote missional vision and missional involvement among students. As Jesus said, “Everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). How can we expect students to catch a vision of joining God in reaching out to the world if their teachers have no such vision?

Conclusion

It is time for those who lead the African Church to reexamine their passion and practice to see if they are in line with God’s mission of reconciling all of humankind to Himself. God has raised up leaders for the purpose of equipping and empowering the Church to engage in mission. We need to see the world as God sees it and help others embrace the same vision of reaching the whole world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
