

ADDRESS BY THE REV ABAMFO OFORI ATIEMO, PhD. EUROPE PRESBYTERY CHAIRPERSON, TO THE 8TH EUROPE PRESBYTERY SESSION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA HELD IN AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS (21 – 24 APRIL 2021)

1.0. Introduction

1.1. Protocols and greetings

Our Special Guest of Honor, the Rt Rev Professor, J.OY. Mante, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Rev Benjamin Appiah, Chairperson of the Brong Ahafo Presbytery, Rev Nii Armah Ashithey, Director of the Department of Ecumenical and Social Relations of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Esteemed Ecumenical Guests, Ministers of Sister Churches, Colleague Agents of the PCG, Treasured People of God, I salute you all in the name of the Coming King, whose righteous and peaceful reign will have no end.

1.2. Gratitude

It is with an immeasurable sense of gratitude to God that I address this Presbytery Session. I also thank all the committed saintly men and women of our congregations and Districts throughout the Presbytery, who have been relentless in supporting the Church's ministry out of a good heart. In extraordinary circumstances where it was, sometimes, tempting to give in to the instinct of self-preservation and turn inward-looking, many of you in leadership positions in congregations and Districts received grace to steer the flock away from that temptation. Such have showed great understanding and helped many members appreciate the value and importance of the Presbytery as an important court of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. May God give you the grace to do more for His glory.

1.3. First In-Person Session in Two Years

This is the third Presbytery Session since my election as the Europe Presbytery Chairperson. However, this is the first time I am addressing the Presbytery Session in person. Covid-19 and its related restrictions compelled us to organize the 6th and the 7th Presbytery Sessions virtual. It is relieving that the 8th Session is being held in person. Yet, I am amazed at how quickly time flies! Reading my third address at this Session means I am left with two years to end my term as Europe Presbytery Chairperson.

Furthermore, the mention of the "8th Presbytery Session" is also an announcement that in two years the Europe Presbytery will be ten years old. Although a ten-year-old is not considered mature to showcase any significant achievements or carry unusual responsibilities, there are tasks that are deemed not only appropriate but imperative for it to fulfill. Failure to perform such tasks often stirs up feelings of disappointment in the family. For example, if it is a normal child, it would be expected to have learned to talk, walk, and show a certain level of other motor and cognitive abilities close to early teen life-skill competencies.

Thinking about all these and the race against time calls up strong feelings of nervousness on the Presbytery Session Council as most of the set goals for 2019 to 2023 are nowhere within our reach. All the effort in the first five years of the Presbytery was devoted to "Finding Paths" through the confusing terrain of a Presbytery that cuts across the borders of about ten different countries, each with its own legal arrangements. Yet, the Presbytery does not seem to have gone beyond the first baby steps to travel the path discovered.

While we are all human and are limited by several factors regarding what we are able to do at any point in time, the grace of God inspires us to expand our horizons beyond mere human capabilities. The grace bestowed on us thrusts us into a realm of limitless possibilities. Each generation of leaders has the obligation to make its own contribution to the development of the community by building upon the work of the previous ones. Despite Covid-19 and the Ukraine crisis, we cannot escape this imperative if we fail. This requires a fresh sense of urgency and an accelerated approach that employs a well-thought-out strategy with inbuilt defences against the self-sabotaging culture which often claws back the little gains the Presbytery occasionally, makes.

2.0. Theme

2.1. *I am the Light of the world*

This Session is guided by the PCG's theme for the year 2021/22: "Jesus Christ, the Light of the World" (John 8:12). The whole verse reads:

'Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."'

Here, the Lord presents Himself as the LIGHT of the World. The original audience that heard Him understood that He was making an ultimate claim and challenged Him (John 8:13). But Jesus insisted His testimony was true! (vs. 14). In that statement, the Lord Jesus was making at least, four claims:

- ✓ That He is God (John 1:4);
- ✓ That He is the source of all light (1:9);
- ✓ That He gave life to all creation (1:3, 4);
- ✓ That Darkness cannot overcome the Light He gives (1:5);

Indeed, He is the prophesied "Sun of righteousness" that "will rise with healing in its wings..." (Malachi 4:2).

2.1. If you follow me, you will not walk in darkness because you will have the light that leads to life

The Lord Jesus does not only present Himself as the Light of the world, but He gives the power of His Light to all who accept His Lordship and receive the salvation He offers. He is THE LIGHT, not a light; not one of many lights! He is the only true light; He is the Light that existed before the Sun was created. Therefore, the Apostle John declares:

"Eternal life is in him, and this life gives light to all mankind. His life is the light that shines through the darkness—and the darkness can never extinguish it" (John 1:4-5).

In this declaration, the Lord beckons the Church to continually submit to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit and shine its light to dispel the zooming darkness that is threatening to overtake the world. Recent world events have shaken the foundations of both weak and powerful societies; world leaders are visibly desperate: no one is sure of the nature of the anticipated New World Order that might finally emerge out of the crisis. Whether any sustainable security arrangements and strong safety nets are going to accompany the New Order cannot be stated with certainty.

2.1.2. From Covid-19 to Ukraine

The issue of uncertainty about the nature of the world order that we should expect after the Covid-19 crisis has become even more complicated in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine. Alliances and blocks of power are being shuffled; it has become increasingly difficult to predict the safety and security arrangements that will finally, emerge. Even more worrying for us, as people of God is the threat to the unity of the Church, which some leaders are prepared to sacrifice for national or ethnic loyalties. All these are happening under the horrifying prospect of the use of nuclear bombs by the world superpowers. Let us join Christian community efforts in the towns and cities of Europe to issue statements on the war, pray for peace, and if need be, participate in peaceful marches if they are organized by ecumenical groups. On our own, let us pray for peace anytime we meet.

2.2. The Church as the Light of the World must shine

Hope is the most essential commodity in these circumstances. The world has found out, though most leaders are not ready to accept, that the hope the powerful nations offer to their people is no hope at all; superpower nuclear bombs can offer neither hope nor a genuine sense of security. What it offers is terror! The only genuine and enduring source of hope is the Lord of the Church who is the Light of the world. He calls the Church, “the Light of the world” and commands it to shine (Matt. 5:14-16).

This imperative to shine demands a constant introspection to evaluate the health of the Church and a rededication to serve the Lord in holiness. Holiness is the inner power of the Church; it validates God’s distinguishing presence among His people (Ex.33:16), and therefore, enables the Church to resist the corrupting influence of the looming darkness threatening to engulf the world.

The command to let our “light shine before people” reechoes the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. This is an indisputable truth, when we consider that the end of it all is that the Father will be glorified (Matt. 5:16).

3.0. Obtaining a good report to keep the light of the Gospel aloft

3.1. Afisem

It is in keeping with the spirit of the theme for the year that we proposed to sharpen our evangelistic drive by launching the project dubbed *Afisem*, at the climax of the New Year Covenant Prayer programme in January this year. As I explained during the launch, *Afisem* (domestic matters) is to turn the searchlight on ourselves, try to identify our weaknesses and actual and potential strengths, and submit to the Holy Spirit for cleansing, renewal and empowerment. The goal is to position our congregations, and by extension, the Districts and the Presbytery, to receive the new members the Lord will add to our number through our evangelistic endeavours.

When participants went into break-out rooms, arranged according to Districts, they identified a list of factors that have marred the reputation of congregations, and for that matter, the PCG in Europe. Items in the list included:

Openly loose lifestyles of many of our members; some members go out wearing PCG paraphernalia such as T-shirts and misbehave at public

gatherings, soiling the reputation of the Church; too much tension, conflict and litigation in many congregations; disparaging our own church before others; holding in high esteem pastors of other churches while belittling our own ministers; several session members are not able to keep the confidentiality of matters that happen there; many of our elders fight over positions rather than the work of God; Some congregation session members refuse to be responsive or accountable to any authority at the local, District or Presbytery; Some leaders at the local level discourage members from contributing to the upkeep of the Church; In some congregations newcomers are neglected; Many congregations neglect the youth; There are too many factions/cliques within our congregations based on ethnicity(e.g. Gas vs Akuapems vs Ashantis), culture (e.g. UK vs Ghanaian), level of education(e.g. educated vs. uneducated); and too much gossip.

3.2. Pursuing the Project on “good report” (Reputation)

While, the issue of reputation among Christians can be tricky, and might even lead to the temptation to want to please people rather than God, it is of great concern to God and necessary for the cause of the Gospel. For example, the bad reputation of believers or the Church supplies ammunition to the enemies of the church to attack it (1Ti. 5:14; 6:1). Indeed, it is for the defence of the integrity of churches that provisions exist in their Constitutions to execute discipline on agents and members when the need arises. Some might even say the subject of reputation lies in the realm of perception or appearances; even so, the public integrity of the church is strongly connected to appearances. This is captured in the spirit of 1Thess. 5:22 (KJV), “Avoid all evil appearances,” and Romans 14:16, “Therefore, do not let your good be spoken evil of.” Most of us at the January programme agreed that there is a great need to improve upon the reputation of the PCG in several places in Europe for greater impact on our witness.

3.3. What can we do in practical terms?

3.3.1. Promoting adherence to the Constitution

The issue is one of low loyalty to the church and the absence of an appreciable level of discipline. It is understandable to have a disagreement in every organisation, but the manner in which such misunderstandings are handled determines the success or failure of the group. Adherence to constitutions helps us handle these matters best.

Constitutions are important for all organisations, including churches. The church constitution and by-laws are to ensure that we do not veer off God’s purpose for His Church. Our Church Constitution is, largely, based on the Scriptures, and does certainly not contain anything contrary to the Scriptures.

Furthermore, God is a God of decency and order; and He requires decency and order in His house (1 Cor.14:33, 40). Church constitutions are meant to help us maintain order in God’s house. It sets the boundaries for both leaders and members as to what may be allowed or disallowed. If we follow our constitution, most of the conflicts that occur in our churches will be prevented.

The Constitution also protects all of us. It defines wrong behaviours and stipulates sanctions. They also protect us from individuals and groups, who may wish to impose themselves and their own idiosyncratic views on everybody.

3.3.2. Some proposed solutions

First, let us get agents, presbyters, group leaders, and all who wield influence at all levels to join in the ongoing efforts to educate our members about the need for discipline and the importance of order in the church.

Second, we should consider getting individuals and groups, who have established preaching posts and congregations to sign a document that would commit them to submit themselves and their congregation to PCG's Constitution and authority before accepting them into the church's fold. Once, a congregation is established under the banner of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, nobody should be allowed to exercise personal control or control by a clique.

Third, Agents must be diligent in admonishing their sessions at the various levels, to uphold the provisions of the Constitution in all relevant matters. If there is a difficulty in interpretation, it is always good to refer the matter to the next higher court. Constitutions are not interpreted privately. When there are challenges, appropriate accredited authorities must be consulted.

It is amazing how, sometimes, some strong individuals or groups of people, can influence their Session and the whole congregation (or district) to ignore provisions of the Constitution, disrespect authority structures, and still think they are right!

3.04. Measures to ensure a peaceful atmosphere for growth to achieve Vision 1.5.

As it is, the main objective of *Afitem* is to improve the health of our congregations for growth toward achieving the goals of Vision 1.5. If you check previous reports, including that of last year, the Europe Presbytery often has the least score in almost every department of the Church's life. If a fruit tree is not growing or not bearing fruits, then, it has a problem. It could be due to insufficient sunlight, poor soil nutrients, or even dangerous weeds. I think the list presented by the various district workshop groups at the *Afitem* programme gives us some insight. In light of that, can this Session consider introducing the following measures?

- i) Move congregational forums from Sunday service to another day, maybe, Saturdays? There are many reports about several members or potential members who because of unpleasant experiences they had at such forums left and never returned.
- ii) The free invitation of non-PCG pastors/prophets/revivalists/ in our pulpits be suspended. From now on, if it must be done, it should be by the expressed permission of the district minister.
 - a) For preaching posts, it must not be allowed at all.
 - b) Let me say that we feel grateful to the many ecumenical friends who helped our congregations in the formative years of the PCG in Europe. We still are happy to maintain a friendship with them. However, denominational traditions are not the same, even if some are similar. To strengthen our own sense of identity and improve on our denominational self-confidence, and the proper establishment of our structures, we need to keep an eye on what happens in our pulpits around the Presbytery.

Allowing everybody free access to our pulpits makes it easy for congregations whose leaders want to side-step the authority structures of the PCG to do so if they can always arrange with an outsider pastor to administer the sacraments for them. Since such ministers have no obligation to the PCG, they can ignore infractions of our constitutions.

5.0 Evangelism, Church growth and discipleship

5.1 NLFA and MC2

Our not-so-very-encouraging performance on the evangelism and church growth front in past year may be largely traced to challenges surrounding the outbreak and spread of covid 19 pandemic. We pray and hope that there will not be any resurgence of the disease. It appears the way is now cleared for to return fully to our personal evangelism and discipleship training programmes: the New Life for All (NLFA) and the Multiplying Churches and Communities (MC2). The M&E Directorate will soon send out information about when the next round of training of trainers will start.

5.2. GPWCs

With the next round of the training of trainers on the Multiplying Churches and Communities (MC2) starting soon, we wish to encourage all districts to nominate enthusiastic, committed, and capable young persons to participate. Let us aim at supporting the existing ones and starting a few others in the districts in this year. Due to a lack of funds and low commitment of many of us, agents and Presbytery officers, our vision for Campus Ministries has not taken off yet. Even some young persons in response to our appeal and offered themselves as Voluntary Campus Missionaries, we could not help them fulfil their calling due to lack of money.

5.3. One Pound/Euro a Month

The one pound/euro a month campaign to provide initial support for the GPWCs and the Campus ministries has been sustained. In fact, it appears, for some agents and their sessions, it was a campaign that died at birth. They just forgot all about it and never remember it again. However, a couple of congregations, Milton Keynes in the Midlands District and Revival in the North London District plus a few persons who attended the North London Zoom prayer programmes during the Covid-19 lockdown made some contributions that helped to settle some initial bills of the virtual services of the GPWCs. did some contributions. All our students, both those who come from Ghana and those living in Europe, leave us when they get to the university because we show no PCG presence on the campuses. I want to remind all of us that the campaign is still on. I propose that the Finance Department appoint coordinators in the various zone to champion this campaign for this year.

6.0. The Presbytery's Social witness

6.1. *Stepping up involvement in social witness ministry*

I want to remind the session again of the Presbytery Mission and Plan which enjoins the DSS at the various Districts and zones to identify specific areas of challenge in the places where they are situated and plan programmes/projects to address them as part of our Christian Social witness. So far, I know about the UK churches, which participate in some of the activities organised by Churches Together in England (CTE) on racism, the environment and peace. Then again, in the UK, some of our members and pastors were persuaded to sign the petition to “Remove Clause 9 from the Nationality and Borders Bill.” We have not done much on our own initiative.

6.2. *Social Witness Fund*

The DSS and the ESR are developing projects to give a clearer direction and a sharper edge to our social witness ministry. We are looking at various sources of funding. One area we want to consider is the reliefs governments and charity commissions give to our congregations in some jurisdictions. For example, if we are meticulous, churches in the UK can receive a substantial amount of money through “Good-to-Give” every year. We are proposing that in jurisdictions where such monies are received, a modest portion of 30% be put in the Social Witness Fund.

This is important since it will help our congregations report, when necessary, to the authorities as being part of the Presbytery's social services projects. Otherwise, some congregations, for all these years, may not have anything to show as their contribution to the societies they serve.

7. I. Agent – Congregation Relations

It is with some unease that I broach the subject of Agent– Congregation relations; yet, it is such an important subject that it is worth taking whatever risk that may be involved in raising it. It was identified as one of the factors that mar the reputation of the PCG in Europe during the launch of the *Afisem* programme. My position as the Presbytery Chairperson also bestows on me the responsibility of

ensuring that pastors and other agents who are our frontline human resources of the Church are protected and empowered to perform at their optimum.

There is nothing wrong with disputes, even in churches. However, if attacks on church agents become persistent in the course of performing their legitimate duties, then it becomes abuse; call it “pastor or clergy abuse.” Let me point out that the PCG does not countenance indiscipline among its ministers; it is swift to crack the whip when an agent is found to have stepped out of line in their dealings with others, inside or outside, the church. Therefore, it is not as if I am advocating any form of discrimination in favour of agents.

7.1.1. Prerogatives

In the Presbyterian church, pastors are the highest permanent officers and the recognised authorities in its core business – preaching and teaching the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It does not mean they are the best qualified; or even the most competent. It only means they are the occupants of the office at a particular time.

Every office comes with its own prerogatives, which enable the effectiveness of the office-bearer. That is why in Hebrews 13:17, the Holy Spirit gives Christians the following advice concerning their leaders: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” The lay minister who acts on behalf of the minister deserves to be accorded such respect in the performance of their duty.

If we humiliate our lay or ordained pastors by insulting them or talking negatively about them in the presence of our children or people who are not our church members, we are unwittingly chipping away at the credibility of our own church. Perhaps, it is one of the reasons our young people seem happier in other churches than ours.

8.1. Standardization of agents’ remuneration

A decision by the 6th Presbytery Session to introduce a uniform policy on the emoluments of ministers has not been done yet. A Committee appointed by Council to work on this will present its report to this Session for consideration.

9.0. Mission Support and Honesty of Sessions

At the 6th and 7th Presbytery Sessions, the workshop group on Accounts and Budget expressed doubts about the authenticity of the percentages submitted by congregations to Districts. A decision was made, mandating Council to ensure a general auditing of congregational, districts and the Presbytery accounts. Though the auditing has not been done, pieces of information picked from the ground suggest that under declaration of income by congregations continue. We plead with all Sessions to remember that anything that dilutes loyalty to the church betrays the unity of the church, and violates the vows their agents and presbyters made at their ordination, consecration or commissioning.

10.0. Music Schools

Some individual congregations in the Presbytery have tried to sponsor persons – young and old – who have an interest in music to train as organists or some other instrumentalist. This is a good effort and we want to encourage those districts who do not have that to begin to explore how they could establish such training programmes. We may charge CLAN to bring to the various Music directors together for this purpose.

11.0. 10th Anniversary celebration

As has been hinted at already, the Europe Presbytery will be ten years old in 2024. It is a major landmark and if we decide to mark it, it can be an occasion for introspection, celebration and the whipping up of enthusiasm in a beneficial way. We leave it to this Session to discuss and take a decision.

12.0. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me, on behalf of the Presbytery Session Council, express gratitude to all of us – the bigger part of the church gathered here through representatives – for the great sacrifices made to sustain the work of the Presbytery. We should congratulate ourselves, especially, for the enthusiasm with which many of us came out in support of the decision to purchase a property for the Presbytery to use a manse and offices. We hope, gradually, we shall come to share fully in, and support, the various aspects of the Presbytery's Mission Plan, especially, the decision to pool resources together for the acquisition of properties for the congregations and districts.

May the God of all graces who gives His Holy Spirit to the Church to carry out its mission in the world visit us again with a fresh Pentecost experience and the church of our time bolder in witness, purer in behaviour, more loving in commitment to the Lord and neighbour, and clearer and more forthright in proclaiming the gospel. Thank you.