

**ADDRESS BY THE REV ABAMFO OFORI ATIEMO, Ph.D. EUROPE PRESBYTERY CHAIRPERSON, TO THE 9<sup>TH</sup> EUROPE PRESBYTERY SESSION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA HELD IN HAMBURG, THE NORTH GERMANY CHURCH DISTRICT (20<sup>TH</sup> – 23<sup>RD</sup> APRIL 2023)**

**1.0. Introduction**

**1.1. Protocols**

The Rt. Rev Prof J.O.Y. Mante, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Esteemed Ecumenical Guests, Venerable Agents and Presbyters, Blessed people of God, *Asomdwoe nka mo* (Peace be unto you)!

**1.2. Thanksgiving**

It has been a full year since we last gathered in Amsterdam for the 8th Presbytery Session. This meeting was our first in-person gathering in three years, following the worldwide pandemic that brought about restrictions and changes in society. Although the pandemic has subsided and restrictions have been eased, its effects on our congregations and members remain. Many are still struggling to find employment, while others are experiencing low attendance at church services and a shortage of volunteers. Financial resources have also been reduced, which has impacted the Presbytery. Despite these challenges, we are grateful for being alive and able to see each other's faces again. We must continue to fulfill our mission of glorifying God by spreading the gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth. As Charles Wesley wrote, "And are we yet alive, / And see each other's face? / Glory and praise to Jesus give / For His redeeming grace. / What troubles have we seen, / what conflicts have we passed, / Fightings without, and fears within, / Since we assembled last."

**2.0. Tenth Anniversary**

**2.1. Celebration**

**2.2.** During the Eighth Presbytery Session in Amsterdam, it was decided that the Presbytery's Tenth (10th) anniversary will be celebrated in 2024. A Committee has been formed by the Presbytery Council to organize and supervise the celebration. The Anniversary will be inaugurated this Sunday during the Presbytery Session Thanksgiving Service. The highlight of

the celebration is expected to be in May 2024, possibly in London.

### **2.3. Successes**

2.4. After ten years of being a Presbytery, it's time to thank the Lord and say "EBENEZER! THUS FAR HAS THE LORD HELPED US" (1 Samuel 7:12). We have accomplished a lot for which we should be grateful. For instance:

2.5. i) Despite the underlying fault lines causing occasional tremors of conflicts, division, and breakaways, we have remained united.

2.6. ii) We have increased the number of congregations and church districts.

2.7. iii) Although membership growth was challenging in the past two years, it has recovered dramatically. By God's grace, we have moved from being the least performing Presbytery to the first position. (The Presbytery Clerk's report will provide more information on this)

2.8. iv) Six out of the seven District head stations in the Presbytery now own manses.

2.9. v) The Presbytery has acquired its own Manse, saving us a lot of money in rent charges. Previously, we paid between £1500 and £1750 a month for rent. By God's grace, the property is turning out to be a good investment, at least on paper, to strengthen our financial position.

### **2.10. Anniversary Theme**

The accomplishments of the past decade should not be a reason to stop serving God. God is constantly leading us towards future goals, and we must always be ready to move forward. Our mission, which calls upon the Church, is ongoing and never-ending. It anticipates the arrival of God's righteous government, which will bring an end to the current world's reign of war and oppression. As such, the theme for our 10th-anniversary celebration will be "Your Kingdom Come!" (Matt. 6:10).

This theme is especially appropriate in Europe, where various kingdoms are competing for control over people's thoughts and beliefs. Governments, corporations, and financial institutions prioritize profit over the well-being of their citizens and will go to great lengths to attain power, even if it means causing

harm to others. This has led to a growing interest in the End Times doctrine, which is good and necessary. However, it can also lead to false beliefs and practices in the Church. Despite this, we must not neglect this central doctrine, which provides hope for believers of all generations. It is time for us to pray even more fervently: "Your Kingdom Come!"

### **3.0. Continuing the Mission**

#### **3.1. Challenges**

The progress of our mission in Europe has continually been hampered by certain challenges that need to be addressed immediately with unity of purpose, steadfastness, faith, and courage. The said challenges include the following:

##### *3.1.1. Inadequate Financial Resources*

I wish to congratulate all active Presbyterian Church of Ghana members in the Europe Presbytery for the great sacrifices they continue to make financially to keep the Presbytery going. The Presbytery Session Council acknowledges the difficult socio-economic circumstances of most of our members and the sacrifices many of our agents make to sustain the mission and ministry of the Church. However, despite the enthusiasm with which faithful members of congregations pay their tithe, offertory, and freewill contributions, mobilizing financial resources for the work of the Church remains a challenge. The Presbytery has not been able to comply with the General Assembly's income-sharing policy based on a 50/50 ratio. As soon as the policy was announced concerns were raised in several congregations in the Presbytery; and the leadership of the Church agreed that ours should be 60/40 instead of 50/50. When no congregation had started to work with the policy, another request came up, which was that congregations in the overseas presbyteries should be allowed to work out the income-sharing ratios of 40/60 after deducting their rents and mortgage payments.

The North-America-Australia Presbytery Chairperson and I, aggressively, pushed for this proposal, and with the support of the Moderator, the Rt. Rev. Mante, it was accepted by the General Assembly. Unfortunately, the policy soon became a nightmare for the Europe Presbytery. As soon as it was announced, payments from the districts to the Presbytery dropped by more than fifty percent (50%). Congregational Sessions claimed that after the deductions nothing remained to be sent to the Districts and the

Presbytery! The Presbytery was in danger of collapsing. Therefore, the Presbytery Session Council was compelled to go back to a modified form of the Assessment system. This arrangement has continued on the advice of the Finance Committee, though, an attempt to seek a dispensation from the General Assembly Council failed and we were directed to go back to the 40/60 since that was the official position of the Church. This means, in terms of the financial administration of the PCG, our Presbytery is seriously out of order.

Since we are out of order, we ought to revert to the official regime of financial administration. But, if we do so, are we going to maintain the policy of prior deductions of rent and mortgage payments? Or are we going to go back to the GA to say, we want to abolish that policy? We may have to consider these issues dispassionately and work out ways in which we can comply with the PCG's official policy and yet, ensure the financial sustainability of the Presbytery as the Third Pillar of the Presbytery's Mission Plan enunciates.

### *3.1.2. Difficulties in Acquiring Property for Chapels and Manses*

The weak financial position of the Presbytery has a direct bearing on the ability of the various congregations to acquire property. As a result, there is a serious deficit of facilities such as chapels, manses, and offices in the Presbytery. Out of the fifty-four congregations and the twenty-four Preaching Points in the Presbytery, only five own chapels: Trinity, the South London District headquarters, Christ, also in South London, and Turnhout in the Netherlands-Belgium District, Modena, and Immanuel Congregation in Vicenza in the Italy-Spain District. To address this acute lack of places of worship, manses, and offices, the presbytery needs to pull the resources of the congregations and districts together. As a recent report of the Property Acquisition and Management Committee observes,

“Several congregations have been holding on to substantial amounts of monies for several years, yet they are not able to acquire the properties they wish because of technical reasons (for some, their monies are losing their value or being squandered on other things).”

The Presbytery's goal, as stated in the Mission Plan, is to support, at least, one district to acquire property for a congregation every two or three years. But this can happen only when there is a readiness on everybody's part to cooperate. This point is underscored by Decision No. 9 of the Eighth (8<sup>th</sup>) Presbytery Session: "*Congregations within the presbytery should pull their resources together to purchase properties.*"

The Presbytery Council was tasked to work out the modalities for the implementation of this decision. The Council, in turn, charged the Property Acquisition and Management Committee to propose a general policy on property acquisition in the Presbytery. Their proposal which has been accepted by the Presbytery Session Council will be laid before this Session for approval.

### 3.1.3. *Persistent Conflicts and Divisiveness within and between Congregations*

By the grace of God, the tensions, conflicts, and divisions that have characterized congregations and districts in the Europe Presbytery since its beginnings have significantly reduced. Participation in the several capacity-building programs organized by the Presbytery, some Districts, the Departments, and some Groups at the Presbytery level have had great positive effects. In this regard, I commend the current leadership of the Presbyters Conference for their admirable efforts to educate their members to show respect for the Constitution of the Church at all levels. At the launch of the **Afitem project** on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2022, we all committed to working toward its goals. The main objective of the project is for individual members, congregations, and agents, "to engage in a critical and honest self-examination in the spirit of 2Cor.13:5<sup>1</sup> in the hope that:

- The Holy Spirit will lead us all to convictions that will move us to commit ourselves more deeply to the ministry of the gospel;
- We all shall deepen our commitment to upholding the core doctrines of our tradition; and resolve to respect the constitution, procedures, and practices of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana;
- All of us – lay and ordained - shall demonstrate a higher sense of loyalty to the Lord and His church;

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<sup>1</sup> "Look closely at yourselves. Test yourselves to see if you are living in the faith. Don't you realize that Christ Jesus is in you? Of course, if you fail the test, he is not in you" (2Cor. 13:5 ERV).

- The Presbytery as individual church members, congregations, and districts, shall unite to fulfill the responsibilities required of us as part of the bigger family of the Europe Presbytery.”

The program was adopted because, in January 2022, we all recognized the need to improve upon the reputation of the PCG in Europe for a stronger impact on our disciple-making efforts. It is heartening to say that several Agents, especially, some District Ministers, some Presbyters, and some Presbytery group leaders have shown a real commitment to achieving the goals of the project.

Beloved members of God’s Household, we have come far, but we still have a long way to go. It appears there are some individuals and small groups in some of our congregations, who are captives of the love of power and the craving for personal gain and fame who thrive in an atmosphere of disorder and will surely work to sink the boat unless they are in control! The sad irony is that many such persons have contributed in significant ways to establishing or building congregations, but their negative attitudes and ambiguous motives tend to destroy all the work they have done. The eternal truth is that any work done for the sake of Christ cannot bear lasting fruit unless it is sacrificial, and any effort made in the name of Christ is tainted if the motive is not for the glory of God! We must always decrease for the Lord to increase;<sup>2</sup> for, it is through the death of self that we gain eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

I wish to invite this Session to consider again the proposal I made in my address last year that the Presbytery should make persons and groups, who have established preaching points and congregations sign a contract that would commit them to submit themselves and their congregations to PCG’s Constitution and the authority of its courts before they are accepted into the fold of the Church. By the principles of the Presbyterian system and the Constitution, once, a congregation is established under the banner of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, nobody is allowed to exercise personal control or control by a clique over it.

Appointment of TRUSTEES for each level of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana is guided by a clearly outlined policy. A letter stipulating who qualifies as a TRUSTEE has been circulated twice in the past two years and copies are available on request from the Secretariat. If, for some reason, you find it difficult to comply with the directive because of legal challenges in your specific country, contact

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<sup>2</sup>John 3:30.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 9:24.

your District Minister. District Ministers should contact the Presbytery Chairperson in case of difficulty.

#### 3.1.4. *Inadequate Adherence to the Constitution of the Church*

My predecessor and Venerable Man of God, the Rev Peter Nyarko used to describe the work of his team as a “Path-finding” ministry, which actually, yielded great results. My team has focused on providing appropriate signposts on the discovered paths and building relevant structures to give form to the Presbytery. Therefore, we have been trying to do everything possible to ensure, at all levels, that there is adherence to the *PCG’s Constitution and Manual of Order* and that, in practice, nobody veers way off the core principles of our accepted governance system. Exposing myself to the danger of being accused of self-repetition, I want to go over a portion of my previous year’s address to Session:

“Constitutions are important for all organizations, including churches. The church constitution and bye-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 behaviors and stipulates sanctions. They also protect us from individuals and groups, who may wish to impose themselves and their idiosyncratic views on everybody.”

Sadly, the pleas and admonitions that were made last year and repeated on various other occasions continue to be ignored by some people in the congregations and the districts. Some of such persons who are presbyters or influential individuals ignore invitations and announcements to attend workshops, seminars, and other capacity-building programs. They take the path of wilful ignorance because they fear embracing the discomfort of order and discipline; they thrive in an atmosphere of chaos and feel comfortable only when they are in control. That is why we have the strange phenomenon of “Agents-in-charge and somebody else in control” in many several congregations and Districts of the Presbytery.

The Presbytery office has received reports about instances in local congregations where a treasurer refuses to release funds approved by Session just because he did not agree or was not present when the decision was made. Then also, there have been instances of Senior Presbyters refusing to step down after two years as stipulated by the Constitution for a fresh election to be held. There are even Presbyters, who have served beyond the maximum two continuous terms of eight years but have managed to stay on, not because there is any special need but because they want to stay on.

It is regrettable to observe that these negative behaviours are also found among agents – lay and ordained. Some do it overtly, others do it covertly. Some agents resort to manipulation of the Session and the unholy tactic of divide and rule to gain a selfish advantage. Last year, Council had the unpleasant duty of sanctioning a catechist in the Presbytery. Although his behaviour deserved dismissal or, at least, a long-term suspension, the Council opted for reprimand, which is one of the mildest sanctions. In the future others may not be so lucky. The Council hopes the formation of the Presbytery Catechists Conference and the revitalization of the Ministers' Fellowship will help minimize such unhealthy behaviours among agents.

### *3.1.5. Indifference toward Presbytery Projects and Directives by some Agents and their Sessions*

The words of the Lord himself were, "Whoever does not gather with me scatters." However, some Sessions, led by their Agents, consistently ignore directives from the Presbytery and show little interest in Presbytery projects. For instance, the Presbytery directive to run the New Life for All program, which was issued two years ago as part of Vision 1.5 goals, was mostly disregarded, and even some District ministers were involved. Despite the Presbytery's efforts to clarify the GPWC concept and alleviate people's fears, Presbyters and Agents are still actively opposing it. In many cases, an individual within the Session who pretends to know more than everyone else and has an ulterior motive misleads the congregation and discourages them from following the Church's authority structures.

Some Agents misunderstand their role and see themselves as protectors of the congregation, treating them like "children" who need protection from the harmful parasites they perceive the District and Presbytery to be. As a result, they discourage their Session from adhering to the principle of Connectional Accountability in various matters. Agents who attend District or Presbytery



meetings but then incite their congregation to refuse to comply with the meeting's decision are not fit for the position. Transfers have been used as a means to minimize such incidents, but the Council will consider additional solutions to address this issue in the upcoming year.

#### **4.0. Addressing the challenges**

In addition to the measures already mentioned, we are also considering the following:

##### **4.1. Monitoring Mechanisms**

Monthly evaluative meetings of the District Ministers and Departmental Directors with the Presbytery Chairperson to review performance and provide remedies for any deficiencies;

Similar meetings between the District Ministers and their agents and District Session officers to review performance within the month;

Regarding financial obligations, we have proposed a form to monitor the flow of remittances to the various courts;

4.2. We also propose to empower the various courts to strengthen the enforcement of the provisions of the constitution and the careful application of relevant sanctions in the case of errant Agents, Presbyters, or members;

4.3. It is also time to find ways to get Presbyters and other officers at the various levels who persistently refuse to participate in capacity-building programs such as workshops, seminars, and conferences. Building and strengthening the governance structures of the presbytery requires continuous improvement in the knowledge and skills of leaders.

#### **5.0. Implementing Decision One (1) of the Fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) Presbytery Session (2018, Vicenza)**

A decision was made to establish a Presbytery for Continental Europe by splitting the existing Europe Presbytery. The Presbytery Session Council was tasked with appointing a committee to create a roadmap for this purpose. The committee's report was reviewed and discussed at the 5th Presbytery Session. In 2022, the discussion was revisited and the committee was expanded to continue the discussion. The Committee's report was approved by the Presbytery Session Council and sent to the General Assembly Council for consideration at the 23rd

General Assembly in August. This item will be presented for ratification at the Session.

## **6.0. Enhancing the Presbytery's Social Ministry**

6.1. The Presbytery's Mission Plan is committed to strengthening our social witness at all levels, as outlined in Pillar Eight. While the Department of Social Services (DSS) has faced some challenges in creating a proposal to achieve this vision, promising discussions have taken place, and a proposal has been presented to establish the Europe Presbytery Development and Social Services Trust (EPreDeSS) to oversee our social witness efforts. We respectfully request the approval of this Session to empower the Council to move forward with this process.

## **7.0. Disputes in Congregations over Infant Baptism, Dedication, and Related Issues**

The Presbytery office has received reports about tensions building in several congregations over the issue of infant baptism versus child dedication and baptism afterward. This seems to be widespread because reports have come from almost every district, especially, on the continent. There seem to be two dimensions to the concerns raised. There is a doctrinal one and a welfare one. I would propose that we commission a study of the issue to enable the Presbytery to gain a comprehensive picture of the issue for it to be addressed fully.

## **8.0. The Gender Identity Controversies, Social and Ecumenical Relations**

There is growing pressure from progressive groups in Western countries to conform to their views on LGBTQI+ matters. This has resulted in a strong backlash from African countries, with several passing laws to prohibit any form of LGBTQI+ activity. In Ghana, a group of parliamentarians with a large following is pushing for similar legislation. The issue has caused a deep division within the European Church. However, some governments and powerful Church groups are trying to impose their views on others. Some churches may need to provide a "satisfactory" statement about their stance on LGBTQI+ in order to access certain services or privileges. This issue is also beginning to affect our relationship with some of our ecumenical partners. It is important for us to draft a statement that reflects the official position of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana on LGBTQI+ issues, while also addressing the situation in European churches and society

### **.9.0. Policy on Agents' Remuneration and Welfare**

Following Decision One (1) of the 6th Presbytery Session, a committee was formed to suggest a comprehensive plan for compensation and benefits for Presbytery agents. The Committee has completed its work and sent its proposals to a workshop group for review and presentation to this Session for approval.

### **10.0. Benediction**

May the lead the Lord lead us to many more glorious EBENEZERS as we hold the current Presbytery session and look forward to the next one. May He prosper the Congregations, the Districts, and the Presbytery in our hands. May the Holy Spirit kindly visit us with a fresh revival. Until the next Session, I say, "NEXT YEAR, IN JERUSALEM!" Shalom!