

**ADDRESS BY THE REV ABAMFO OFORI ATIEMO, PRESBYTERY
CHAIRPERSON, TO THE 7TH EUROPE PRESBYTERY SESSION OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA, MEETING VIA ZOOM CONFERENCING**

(28-30 May 2021)

Introduction

Greetings

I give praise to the Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has not despised us, as unworthy as we are, but has drawn us into His saving grace, sanctified us, and given us the right to call ourselves “Children of the Most High.” On behalf of the Presbytery Council, I greet you all. It is good to see one another again.

Gratitude

We must give thanks to God for preserving our lives and guiding us through the difficult and tricky circumstances thrust on us by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also owe Him thanks for the strength, courage, and wisdom He gave our political and church leaders to manage all the difficulties. We congratulate the many volunteers – lay and ordained – who, at the risk of their lives, took it upon themselves to ensure that vulnerable church members were catered for. We applaud those people – young and old – who helped the congregations to maintain Christian fellowship through telephone conference line meetings and video-conferencing. Worthy of special mention are also those who, in the face of general financial difficulties, stood up and continued to give generously to the Church for the sake of God. May the Lord Jesus Christ remember you in the day of trouble.

Covid-19

The Church year 2019/2020 has been a rather challenging one. The world was almost ground to a halt by the COVID-19 pandemic which turned the world upside-down. Its impact was so huge that ways of life that had been taken for granted over centuries suddenly had to change. Several new and, previously recondite terms, that have now become part of our commonplace expressions are evidence that the effect of this pandemic is going to be with us for a long time to come. Here, I have in mind terms such as, “lock-down”, “mask-up”, “social distancing”, “quarantine”, “self-quarantine”, “patient zero”, and “contact-tracing”.

The Church, worldwide, including the PCG, has not been spared the negative effects of the pandemic. There is no doubt that the faith of many faithful, especially, young believers, has been shaken. The grief suffered over the loss of loved ones; the very close brushes with death personally experienced by several believers; the loss of livelihoods; and the dwindling investments of many individuals and families – all these have left in their trail abnormal conditions that will take more than a lifetime to recover if the Lord Himself does not intervene. Yet, we know, that He will intervene and everything will ultimately work for the good of His people (Rom. 8:28).

As we expect the easing of restrictions in many places in the world to continue, and hope there will not be a relapse, we have to prepare ourselves to live and operate in the

emerging “new normal”. No one can be sure what this new normal will entail; but the resilience, creativity, and drive shown by the ordained and lay leadership at the various levels of our church during those lockdowns, have certainly prepared us for the expected challenges.

Can we begin to consider how the numerous novelties may be employed to improve Church life and worship? In reference here include the following:

- ✓ The use of virtual spaces for meetings, including business meetings, Bible Studies, Prayer sessions, and talks on special topics by experts. A great advantage of this was the opportunity to receive ministrations from experts and gifted people sitting in the comfort of our homes. It is like going to church meetings in a faraway place without spending money on transport;
- ✓ Using electronic means to pay tithes and offerings;
- ✓ Disciplining ourselves to have shorter in-person worship services;
- ✓ Ordained and lay individuals coming up with so many social media initiatives to use their gifts to fulfill their ministries – we have discovered preachers, teachers, evangelists, counsellors, prayer warriors, and worship leaders through social media.
- ✓ There are others whose gifts did not bring their faces to social media, but whose organizational skills and technical knowledge made possible and effective the activities we saw on social media.

All these, we may say, are blessed new things we can profitably draw on for church life and worship in the post-covid period. It means it has not all been negative; out of a “death situation” has come new life!

Theme for 2020/21

The PCG’s theme for the 2020/21 Ecclesiastical year is “*Equipping the saints for the work of the ministry*” (Eph. 4:12). This theme could not have come at a more opportune time than the immediate post-covid era. I make this observation for two reasons:

- ✓ Many church members discovered their special abilities and spiritual gifts in the covid era and they are bubbling with enthusiasm for the work of the ministry;
- ✓ The traumatic experiences of many people around the world caused by the pandemic presents a big opportunity for sharing the message of the gospel, as many are looking for answers to the puzzles triggered by recent events in the world.

Uniting to Fulfill the Great Commission

In keeping with the substance of this theme, my Address for the 7th Presbytery Session is entitled. **Uniting to fulfill the great commission**

In His so-called High Priestly prayer, recorded in John ch. 17, Jesus said: *‘I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly*

one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me (John 17:20-23).

In this passage, it is clear that the last thing Jesus would want to see about His church is division. It is our deepest desires, burdens, and threats that we often take to God in prayer. For Jesus to have prayed about unity, mentioning it several times in a single prayer time, means the unity of the church is most important to Him. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana recognizes this and, therefore, has as our motto, “That they all may be one” (John 17:21).

If the only reason why Christians should pursue unity is to make the Lord happy, that would be sufficient; but there is another reason that makes the need for Christian unity imperative. That is, our visible unity reinforces the credibility of the message we preach. The Lord explains this in His prayer:

- ✓ in verse 20- it is through our (believers’) message that other people in the world will believe in Him;
- ✓ in verse 21 –but it is through our oneness with the Father and the Son, and our unity with one another, that the people of the world will believe in our message;
- ✓ in verse 23 – it is through our unity that the people of the world will understand and experience the love of God and so believe in our witness about His Son Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.

This means, anybody who stirs up division and undermines the unity of any congregation, of any district, of the Presbytery, or the Church as a whole, is not only rebelling against God but dishonoring the Lord Jesus Christ in the eyes of the world. Christian disunity is displeasing to the Lord and impedes the effectiveness of the Church’s evangelization efforts.

Yet, factionalism and conflicts, which sometimes, lead to a party breaking away to start a new congregation continue to occur in our presbytery. It becomes even more embarrassing when parties become entrenched in their positions, refusing all entreaties to settle for peace. There are several congregations in our presbytery whose members continue to nurture resentment and hatred toward others who belong to a congregation from which they broke away. It is amazing that we do not feel ashamed of such behaviors and repent of them. It appears some people are bold in such disputes because they think they are fighting God’s battles. But claiming to be fighting God’s battles and hating fellow church members can only be a deception from Satan.

Another disturbing aspect of this culture of conflict and division is the attempt by some influential persons and opinion leaders in some places to present the District and Presbytery to their members as dangerous parasites that feed on the congregations’ resources without contributing anything. They claim they are protecting their congregations against the ‘parasites’. Therefore, they discourage their local sessions from fulfilling financial and other obligations to the District and the Presbytery. This is a regrettable show of disloyalty to the Church, which betrays a dangerous misunderstanding of our system of church governance. Let all agents, presbyters, group leaders, and all who have some influence in the various congregations refrain from such ungodly behaviors and educate their members to develop proper attitudes of loyalty toward the Church.

As I have explained several times at different forums, one of the cardinal principles of the Presbyterian system of governance is that the Church is connectional; that is: *a smaller part is subject to a larger part and a larger part is subject to the whole*. So, the minimalist

hierarchical system of our church does not have at its pinnacle an individual or a body unconnected to the grassroots. It is the General Assembly, which represents the 'whole' and, in which all the parts are represented that is the highest body of the church. Therefore, whatever the 'smaller' or the 'larger' have is owned by the 'whole'. In that case, the disloyalty of any of the parts is self-sabotaging because it affects the whole, including the part being disloyal.

The Need to Minimize Conflicts and Promote team-spirit

Conflicts are normal in organizations, including the church. When they occur over the central or the main purpose of the organization, it is a healthy sign. It indicates that members are genuinely passionate about the good of the organization and seek the best way to achieve it. In such situations, parties listen to one another and are without malice, whatsoever. Resolving such conflicts is easy because everybody concerned seeks the good of the whole; not just the good of any of the parts.

However, in our case, sometimes, disagreements turn into enmity and seriously affect growth on all fronts. Regarding some of your own fellow church members as enemies is like a soldier turning his weapon on his own troops! It is a hugely embarrassing disaster. As I observed last year, most people consider the Church a place you go for refuge when you have had enough betrayals, hurts, rejection, and stress in life. Therefore, it is disgraceful if a church environment breeds the same evils as those in the world from which people are running to the Church for refuge.

There is an urgent need to intensify activities that promote unity and build team spirit. In the coming year, we have lined up seminars and workshops for members of the various sessions and councils in the Presbytery – Congregational, District, and Presbytery. Committee members, group executives, and members of the ministries will also be included. The themes to be addressed in these workshops will include Building Teams for effective Church leadership; Christian approaches to conflict resolution; Pastoral care in the African diaspora communities in Europe; Evangelism, Missions, and Contemporary Secular ethics in Europe. Some of these themes will also be incorporated into the continuing education programme for agents and the formal LMT training programme.

Yet even more important than these intentional activities to promote unity is an intense focus on the mission of the Church – evangelism, prayer, fellowship, bible study, worship, and service – for which per our theme, the church is to prepare its members to do. The absence of unity is most often a symptom of a church's deviation from its God-assigned purpose. When personal preferences become superior to the priorities of the Lord, the result is confusion and division. Nobody - individual or group – should allow their personal kingdoms to take precedence over the business of God's Kingdom.

I appeal to all, both those present here at this Session, and those not here with us, to move away from wasting their energies on trivial issues which bring no benefit, apart from a false sense of importance when we think our side has won in disputes, and the dismemberment of the Body of Christ. Rather than spending our energies fighting among ourselves, let us unite and use those energies to expand the Kingdom of God. As I admonished last year, "Some damage has already been done to the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) brand in the UK and Europe; do not let us add to it."

Vision 1.5 and our Growth Target

Reaching our growth goals for 2020 has been fraught with challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying restrictions. It has not even been possible to have reliable statistics for growth. Hopefully, with the easing of restrictions, in-person meetings will soon start and we shall be able to know the true status of our growth.

Last year, the Presbytery session agreed on a set of strategies to boost the evangelism and mission efforts of congregations and districts. We can report that the Presbytery Council has taken steps toward the use of these strategies. First, the *New Life for All* (NLFA) programme has been launched, and the districts have been asked to appoint coordinators to ensure the programme produces the desired results. Second, the Training of trainers for the ***Multiplying Churches and Communities*** (MC2) method has started and the first batch has graduated and been commissioned to start Epaphras Cells as nuclei of the **Global Presbyterian Worship Centres (GPWCs)**. So far, three GPWCs have started: one in Gottingen in the North Germany District; a Virtual one by the North London District, which will, hopefully, move to a Chapel at Tavistock Place soon; one in Milton Keynes in the Midland District, and a Cell in the Halle University in Germany.

Furthermore, the Presbytery Council, in the course of the year, directed all Districts to map out new areas for expansion. These areas to be mapped out will be assigned to graduates of the LMT programme, who are willing to seek consecration, to lead teams to plant churches. Their success will, partly, justify their suitability for consecration into the lay ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Several Districts have complied and submitted their lists; others are yet to do so.

I propose that our enthusiasm-boosting activities adopted last year should be maintained. I am referring to the ***Where is your one? Monitoring Campaign***; with the hymn **PHB 524** as the rallying song. I am of the conviction that we shall exceed our growth goal in numbers and quality if all our congregations diligently run any of the two evangelism and discipleship programmes – the **NLFA** and **MC2** we have adopted.

Fulltime/Part-time M&E Coordinators

The mapping out of the new areas for church planting and the deployment of LMT graduates and their teams require well-thought-out strategies, backed by persistent prayer, to sustain growth. In connection with this, it will be helpful to have ministers – lay or ordained – coordinate these church planting activities for maximum results. Since, our budget line for Missions and Evangelism, is quite thin, we may have to rely on part-timers and volunteers as we prepare to mobilize funds toward full implementation next year. This has implications for some of our District Ministers since they are the only full-timers, we have. We may have to engage them on a quarterly or bi-monthly basis to double up as part-time coordinators. I appeal to all district-head station congregations to show some understanding in these matters.

Voluntary Campus Missionaries and Full/Part-time Coordinators

Our young people continue to leave our Church or abandon Christianity altogether when they reach university or after university. We would not be doing ourselves any good if we continue to remain indifferent about this matter. We spend our time and other resources training them from children's service through JY for other churches to take them away when they have

become mature to take their own place in the ministry and contribute to the growth of our church. We cannot continue to be the ‘nursery’ of other churches. A brief survey carried out by some JY teachers in the UK suggests that many children in our Junior Youth (JY) have a dual church membership – they attend a charismatic church in addition to the Presbyterian church at the same time. It is likely that many of them carry this behaviour to the stage of the YPG.

What this means is that we have to increase the PCG presence on university campuses around Europe. In light of this, I propose that we appoint full-time Campus Ministries Coordinators for the various zones. We can begin with part-timers until we are able to raise funds to finance full-timers. It is also time to launch the Presbyterian Young Missionary Movement (PYMM), which is part of the strategies to achieve the Vision 1.5 goal. We can encourage fresh graduates with a passion for mission work to sign on to this Movement as Volunteer Missionaries (or Youth Workers) for a period between six months and one year. I plead with this Session to approve this proposal and charge the Mission and Evangelism Department (M&E) and the Development and Social Services Department (DSS) to work out strategies for each of the various countries and provinces. This must include identifying and pursuing sources of funding for the project.

Christian Education Material Editorial Task Force

In response to widespread complaints from children’s service and JY teachers, it has become necessary to put together a Task Force for each of the countries to work on the Christian Educational materials that come from the Church Life and Nurture (CLAN) Department in the Church House in Accra. This Taskforce will consider all materials and adapt them to suit the several different contexts in Europe. This Taskforce will work directly under the Presbytery CLAN Department. I am aware of a couple of places where some teachers try, on their own, to edit and adapt the Children’s service and JY materials. However, in order to share resources, a more structured and integrative approach is necessary. The CLAN Department may be tasked to work out the modalities for the implementation of this as soon as possible.

The Family-spirituality Enrichment programme

A team put together to develop the models for the *Family-Spirituality Enrichment Programme* has completed some of the models and is working on the others. If there is time, they will be invited to present a brief report to this Session.

Property Acquisition

In the past year, our Congregation in Turnout in the Holland-Belgium District acquired a chapel. On behalf of the Presbytery Session Council, I congratulate the leadership and membership of the Congregation. I also, wish to thank all the congregations, groups, and individuals who generously responded to our appeal for support to buy the property. I hope the spirit of solidarity exhibited with so much enthusiasm toward the purchase of that property will open our eyes to understanding the blessings of unity.

Presbytery Chairperson’s Manse

A fundraising to purchase a residential property for the Presbytery Chairperson was launched at the Pentecost Prayer Convocation, which was held on the eve of Pentecost Sunday this year. The enthusiasm with which many people made contributions to the fund was gratifying. This

is a big step of faith because we have launched this project at a time when the great majority of our members, congregations, and districts are facing serious financial challenges. But our God has promised to honour faith as small as “the mustard seed”. Therefore, I appeal to all of you to cooperate with the fundraising committee put together by the Presbytery Session Council to raise funds to acquire the property.

Social Witness

Our plan for each district/zone to identify and tackle one major social challenge in their area does not seem to have taken off. It seems this is a specialist area that requires, at least, some rudimentary training. I am already in discussion with the Department of Social Services (DSS), proposing to them to collaborate with the Ecumenical and Social Relations (ESR) and the Administration and Human Resource Department (AHR) to organize training for all agents and District and Congregation Committees under DSS and ESR. Subject to the approval of this Session, a proposal of this must be submitted to the Standing Committee before 1st July 2021.

Finance

In the course of this Session, we shall discuss and approve the budget for the year, 2021/22. It is a rather tight budget. Many of our Congregations have complained about the harsh effect of COVID-19 and its restrictions on their finances. Some report that their savings over several years, which were being made toward the purchase of a manse or chapel have dwindled because they have had to borrow from them for other purposes. Indeed, such complaints have become a threat to the survival of the Presbytery, with a couple of District head stations asking for the suspension of their stations as full-time resident Minister’s seats because they do not have money to pay salaries and meet other expenditures on pastors.

However, even before COVID-19, some of the stations that are now complaining were not doing so well in fulfilling their financial obligations. In fact, many congregations and Districts have not been honouring their obligations. We have reports that some sessions deliberately under-declare their income to escape paying the correct percentages on it to the District and the Presbytery. This is most unfair to the larger church because the General Assembly Council has graciously granted our plea to allow us to pay percentages on our income after deducting our rent and mortgage on our manses and chapels.

I humbly propose to this Presbytery Session to call for the audit of all District finances and submit a report to the Presbytery Council by the end of the year 2021. The Presbytery Audit Committee or the Audit Section of the Finance Directorate of the General Assembly office may be asked to do this.

New Pastoral Stations and Sub-Districts

Our focus on growth and expansion demands that we prepare ourselves in anticipation of the positive results of our evangelistic and missionary activities. The challenges involved in pastoring church districts that span two countries or more have been pointed out by several of us on different occasions. It slows down growth and makes pastoral care quite ineffective. The different legal systems add to the frustration. In light of these, it is proposed that next year, two sub-Districts will be created: Spain sub-District, out of Italy-Spain; and Belgium sub-District out of Holland-Belgium. This will hopefully, help the growth and expansion of our church in

those countries to position them well for their inauguration as districts in two years' time. This will also mean stationing full-time ministers in those places.

Furthermore, two stations will be made resident pastoral stations. These are Hannover in Germany and Toulouse in France. There is every indication that posting resident ministers to these places will enhance growth and expansion. Arrangements toward achieving these ends will start in the next couple of weeks.

Election of Clerk

One of the most important items on our agenda at this Presbytery Session is the election of a new Presbytery Clerk. Working with Rev Benjamin Appiah for almost two years has been a joy. His humility, intelligence, and knowledge of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana's governance systems have combined to make him unusually skillful and competent. Let me, on behalf of all of you, congratulate him on his election to the office of Presbytery Chairperson. I am convinced that the special gifts and strength of character that made him a successful Presbytery Clerk will make him succeed also, as a Presbytery Chairperson. Let us prayerfully, approach the election for his replacement and I am confident that the Lord himself will get us another competent person to succeed this indefatigable minister.

Conclusion

Let us hold together in unity, learn to forgive one another, open up to the Holy Spirit to heal our hurts, and guide our ways to help us stay on track as we await the fulfillment of His promise. I pray that the Lord, will give us grace and grant our prayer and keep us alert so that we may not miss the moment of His visitation