

ADDRESS BY REVABAMFO OFORI ATIEMO, PRESBYTERY CHAIRPERSON TO THE 6TH EUROPE PRESBYTERY SESSION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA MEETING VIA INTERNET MEDIA CONFERENCING, 26-27 JUNE, 2020

Introduction

a) *Greetings*

I salute you all precious fathers and mothers; brothers and sisters; and sons and daughters in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is with a deep sense of gratitude to God to be alive and see each other again. Despite the rather devastating experience of losing so many loved ones and neighbors within such a short time, we can still praise God for bringing the devouring pandemic to an end. We look forward in hope to a future of complete healing and restoration.

b) *Gratitude*

I give glory to God for His protection, guidance, and enabling grace since November 2019, when I assumed office as the second Chairperson of the Europe Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. It has been exciting working with all of you agents, presbyters, group leaders, and members of various committees. I have also observed with admiration, as I go around visiting congregations in various parts of the continent, the commitment of many other members involved in the various ministries at the local congregational and other levels. The sacrifices many of our members are making in keeping the work of the Church going are amazing. May the Lord remember you and reward you greatly in this life and the future life of eternity. Be assured, “For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10).

Let me also express gratitude to the delegates of the 5th Presbytery Session, who elected me into office as the 2nd Chairperson of the Europe Presbytery. To think that I was elected to this office when most of the delegates did not already know me, and my name had not been publicized for the position of Chairperson anywhere in the Presbyterian church of Ghana, is so humbling. I can only interpret it as an indication of a special call on my life by the Lord. With this conviction, I have accepted the position in obedience to God’s will. Therefore, I come as a servant of God, a Missionary an Apostle to Europe. But I also consider it a great privilege to have the opportunity to work with some of you to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and build His Church in Europe. In all these, I acknowledge the foundational work that has had inputs from many faithful persons - lay and ordained – especially, the immediate past Chairperson, the Rev Peter Kofi Nyarko, who with his team engaged in a “path-finding ministry”, seeking safe routes around the tricky and complex terrain of doing church in Europe.

- I. I address this Presbytery Session on the topic, **BEING WITNESSES TO CHRIST AS AFRICAN CHRISTIAN MIGRANTS IN CONTEMPORARY UK AND EUROPE**

I read from Acts 11:19-30 [ESV]:

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the

Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 24for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

27Now in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

My address, based on this text, covers the following areas:

1. The mandate to be witnesses and disciple-makers for Christ;
2. Contemporary European Societies and Christianity;
3. Recognizing giftings and developing teams for ministry;
4. Preparing ourselves to receive others in the multi-diverse societies;
5. Fellowship and collaboration with the worldwide Church;

i) The mandate to be witnesses and disciple-makers for Christ

A command of the Lord Jesus Christ that every generation of the Church anywhere in the world is under obligation to obey is the Great Commission, recorded in Matthew 20:18 -20; and repeated in other places including Mark 16:15-16 and Luke 24:49. This command places a demand on us to make disciples of all nations. In verse 19 of our passage: Acts 11, we read that the persecuted believers went as far as Cyprus, Phoenicia and Antioch, preaching to only Jews. All the believers at that point were Jews and, for some reason, they decided not to preach to the citizens and non-Jews in these lands where they went to. They preached to only the Jews; not those who were unlike them. However, later on, when some of these believers reached Antioch, they broke the barrier and reached out to non-Jews, commonly referred to as Gentiles by Jewish custom. The Lord gave them favour and some of these Gentiles believed and joined the Church.

The Church in Antioch experienced the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in great measure, and a revival broke out. The intensity of the revival and its visible effect on the believers and the powerful impression it made on the society is underscored by the fact that it was in Antioch that the believers were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Peter’s declaration that the promise of the Holy Spirit was for all nations and all generations, including the unborn, was practically proved in the Church in Antioch. The Lord gave us the Holy Spirit, first, to be His witnesses. He is the everlasting presence of God; the perpetual flame on the altar of God in our hearts and wherever the Church is present and the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached.

The presence of the Holy Spirit gives us both the enthusiasm and the motivation to preach the gospel in good times and in bad times. The believers who were fleeing persecution preached

wherever they went, not paying heed to the stresses and dangers the persecution brought to them. Nor were they perturbed by the conditions of their migrant situation. They saw the diaspora as an opportunity for spreading the good news about the resurrected Christ. They persisted in preaching and living a life consistent with their message and God honored their faith and effort with overflowing anointing. They preached and the Lord gave the harvest. Many Jews and non-Jews accepted the gospel in Antioch. Great similarities may be seen between our own situation in Europe and that of the early Christians in Antioch.

I call upon the Session to renew our commitment to the Great Commission, strengthen our disciple-making efforts in the existing congregations, and plant new ones to accommodate the continuous stream of migrants coming from Africa to Europe. However, the time has come to witness to the host European communities, not only by our presence as African Christians in their midst but by intentional moves as was done by the early Christians in Antioch and adjoining towns.

ii) Encounters with God in the Land of the Missionary (Contemporary European Societies and Christianity)

One of the shocks that African Christian migrants to Europe experience comes from the observation that religion, especially, Christianity does not mean much to European societies anymore. With many chapels abandoned for lack of worshippers and turned into pubs, apartments, or sold to other faiths and turned into non-Christian places of worship, the newly-arrived African Christian migrant to Europe is left confused and disoriented for a long time.

Europe is not only secular but sometimes, militantly so. Strong belief in the Bible and its worldview and morality is considered outmoded and inconsistent with the spirit of the contemporary time. Early this year, bookings for all the venues for a planned seven-city evangelistic campaign tour by Franklin Graham of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Associations were cancelled because he had supported the Church of England's affirmation of the Biblical view of marriage in his Facebook postings. Christianity is tolerable in Europe if the language of the Bible is adjusted to agree with the relativist orientation of the world.

The relativist orientation is considered most appropriate in the context of the cultural and religious diversity of contemporary European societies. The context makes Biblical Christianity, especially, the central truth of the Gospel which stresses the uniqueness of Christ, a scandal. *Observatory*, a Vienna-based Non-Profit, in its 2019 report documented 325 incidents of Christian persecution in Europe in 2018 alone. Commenting on the report, the organization's Executive Director noted:

"In 2018, the Observatory documented a rise in the number of churches, Christian symbols, and cemeteries across Europe being vandalized, desecrated, and burned, compared to previous years. But these incidents do not provide a complete picture of the situation for Christians in Europe."

He continued:

"We have seen Christian-run businesses financially ruined, street preachers arrested, Christians forced to choose between their moral values and their professions, Christian student groups and speakers silenced on campuses, asylum claims of Christian refugees arbitrarily denied, and parental rights trampled on by overreaching governmental interference."

Yet, this gloomy picture of love lost between Christianity and the land of the missionaries whose work produced the African Christian does not release us from fulfilling the Great Commission in Europe. The situation of diversity brings to us in one swoop, the “all nations” of the Great Commission of whom we are charged to disciple. Thus, more than a challenge, the diversity we encounter in Europe is an opportunity.

iii) Challenges and opportunities of our migrant condition

Some missiologists have observed what they have described as a “reverse mission” in connection with the vibrant African Christian presence in Europe. However, this observation is only true to an extent. The low socio-economic situation of many of us African Christians places us in a weaker position in relation to the Europeans we seek to evangelize, and this makes our mission hugely challenging. The European missionaries who came to Africa were, most of the time, in a more powerful socio-economic position, and were supported by the political establishment almost all the time. We lack that. Sometimes, the big cultural gap between us and our European Christian counterparts has also made it difficult for us to cooperate in a meaningful way. In certain instances, they have refused to share chapels with us, or have done so reluctantly.

Despite these limitations, we are still called to be witnesses of all the things concerning Jesus Christ to everyone anywhere in the world all the time. The persecuted Christians of the early Church, dared to proclaim the gospel, though not many of them came from high socio-economic backgrounds. In the streets and alleys of the cities of secular Europe, one can still sense a whiff of the divine presence; and there is evidence that there is still a search for meaning; a search for community; and a desire to discover one’s spiritual self. Therefore, recognizing the grace of God at work, we must boldly launch out to witness to Europe in the spirit of the concept of reverse mission; and also continue to evangelize the stream of African and other migrants coming to Europe daily.

Evangelization in 21st Century Europe by African Christians can, in the end, produce a powerful synthesis of theological and liturgical regimes out of the dialogue between the great European theological traditions and the deep and expressive spirituality of the African church. This means our approach to mission in Europe must involve the discipline of listening. Christian Missions in this context must respond to the deep questions asked by Europeans and all who find themselves in Europe. We may proclaim Christ as the answer, but He must be the answer not to our needs but to the needs of those we seek to disciple. Searching the Bible together for answers to their questions usually leads to new discoveries that benefit both the evangelist and the evangelized.

iv) Fellowship and collaboration with the worldwide Church

The motto of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana is “that they all may be one” (John 17:21). Thus, for us, it is imperative to pursue unity with other Christians anywhere who hold the same basic truths as we hold. We must explore opportunities for fellowship and collaboration with Christian bodies in the various countries in which we operate for witnessing and the promotion of causes such as justice and the wellbeing of all people. It is gratifying to learn that the PCG in England has been admitted to the membership of the Churches Together in England (CTE) and the PCG in Belgium is vigorously pushing to be admitted to similar fellowships.

v) A New Wineskin to Proceed

Doing Missions in Europe in the 21st Century certainly requires a repositioning of our Church to maximize effectiveness. This, first of all, necessitates a *re-discipling* of ourselves. This must begin with a redefinition of our identity, first as Christians, and second as Presbyterians. The Presbyterian/Reformed tradition holds dearly the doctrine of the Covenant, which presupposes a relationship. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* says the God of the Scripture is a “God in covenant.” God is in covenant with His people; This is the one Covenant of Grace underlying salvation history, the substance of which as was first revealed to Abraham: “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Gen.17:7-9). Our place in this covenant is eternally secured in the Lord Jesus Christ as He declared on the night when He was betrayed: “This is the New Covenant in my blood” (Matt. 26:28). Therefore, we are the people of God in the New Covenant of the blood of Jesus; and the Spirit bears witness in us that we belong to God in Him (Romans 8:16-17). But the Covenant also creates a nation, a community. In our case, a community of royal priests set aside to offer spiritual sacrifices to God by showing His goodness to all people (1Peter 2:5 and 9).

To achieve this goal of re-discipling ourselves for spiritual renewal and witnessing, we shall lay before this Session, two discipleship programmes for use throughout the Presbytery in the coming year. First, the *New Life For All* Programme, developed by the Ghana Evangelism Committee. This will be used by the general Church. Second, the *Multiplying Churches and Communities* Programme developed by the Campus Crusade for Christ, for the youth and the global Mission Worship Centres. It is our conviction that this will equip church members to engage confidently to achieve the goals of Vision 1.5. The Mission and Evangelism Committee will be expected to present recommendations on these proposals to this Session.

Discipleship is not comprehensive enough if it does not lead Church members to discover their gifts and ministries to participate in the life of the church. The Christian community that grew in Antioch did produce believers with giftings and ministries that helped build the Church. Through such gifts, Barnabas and Paul were identified as missionaries and were sent out on Missionary journeys. In this direction, we task Agents and their Sessions to create an enabling environment in their congregations for members to discover their gifts and ministries and use them to help build the Church. The Committee on CLAN is charged to present a proposal for consideration by this Session.

In this task of mission and evangelization, a special focus on the youth and young adults is critical. A rearrangement of Church life in a way that helps to retain the youth and young adults and equip and motivate them for leadership in witnessing and service should be made. The great potential of the youth and young adults for ministry must be unleashed for the glory of God. The Committee on Church Life and Nurture (CLAN) will present a proposal on aspects of children and youth ministry. Other plans are laid out in the Europe Presbytery Mission Plan. Part of the plan is the establishment of the Global Presbyterian Worship Centres (GPWCs), primarily, meant to create space for non-Ghanaians God will bring in response to our evangelistic endeavors, as well as receive our young people who, in some instances, seem out of place in our conventional congregations.

Strengthening ourselves for the direction we want to go also requires a sound and sustainable financial regime. Financial support for missions is critical. In the course of the restrictions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Standing Committee approved a stop-gap measure proposed by an ad-hoc committee of the Finance and Budget Department to enable the

Presbytery, to at least, fulfill parts of its obligations, including payments to the General Assembly Office. At this Session, the Ad-hoc committee will report on how the various Districts and congregations have cooperated in this matter. Agents and Sessions are expected to work hard to improve upon the finances of the Districts and, for that matter, the Presbytery.

At stakeholders' workshops in the UK and the Continent, I launched an appeal for Support of the Europe Presbytery's Mission Plan. I appealed to all who can afford to contribute one Euro (in Europe) and one pound (UK) a month to this fund. The disruption in physical meetings has not made it possible for the collection of these contributions to take off. This Session is tasking the Presbytery Finance Department to make proposals to the Council as to how and where to send these contributions before July 15, 2020.

Our preparation for the expected "New Wine" must include a proper and clear arrangement for accountability and probity at all levels. The PCG financial policy has sufficient provisions for financial accountability. Neither agents nor Presbyters nor officers at any level are allowed to undermine this system. In connection with this, an arrangement is being made for the Director of Finance at the General Assembly Office to organize a Virtual Workshop in July for the Presbytery Council and all Agents, Treasurers/Directors of Finance, and Senior Presbyters.

For all the period that we have tried to establish our presence in Europe, one of the greatest challenges has been with acquiring spaces for worship, office, and residence for agents. It is gratifying that some of our very committed men and women have led in the acquisition of property for the Church. Here, let me mention the Trinity and Christ Congregations of the South London District; the Ramseyer Congregation of the North London District, and the Emmanuel and Unity congregations in the Italy-Spain District. However, we still have a serious deficit in physical infrastructure. To address this deficit, a committee was put together to help explore less stressful ways of acquiring property in the UK. The results of their work might help find leads to achieve a similar aim for our districts and congregations on the continent. They will present their recommendations to this Session for a decision.

Recent consultations with denominational and ecumenical bodies in England and the UK at large, have revealed that our presence in the public space can be more visible and our strength to negotiate can be enhanced if we present a united front. In fact, the Presbytery has no proper legal standing in the UK or anywhere else in Europe. But to realize our vision and fulfill our mission requires a proper structure, guided by a clear system of probity and accountability. When this is done, it would surely also boost our credit standing with financial institutions for the benefit of congregations and districts.

As part of this vision, certain small congregations that are in close proximity to each other may be asked to unite. But this will be done on a case-by-case basis. Those that are found to be viable on their own would be retained but, congregations that are struggling and show no great promise will be directed to join with another to form one congregation. District Session Councils will be tasked to look at such congregations in their Districts and give recommendations.

An issue that has been of concern to me since assuming office as the Presbytery Chairman is the rather unchristian manner in which we have pursued personal interests in our congregations and districts. This has been accentuated by an unbiblical approach to disputes, projecting a negative image of ourselves and undermining our witness. When we deliberately or unwittingly

turn personal ambition and prejudice into community-wide grievances, and spark conflicts which sometimes, dismember the body of Christ, we crucify Jesus all over again. The Church is a place where people come when they have had enough betrayals, hurts, rejection, and stress. If we create an environment that breeds the same, we drive people away, and we fail the tests of love and righteousness (Matt. 18:15-24; Rom. 12:18; 1 Cor. 6:1-5; 1Cor. 3:17). Some damage has already been done to the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG) brand in much of the UK and Europe; do not let us add to it. Let us embark on a project of redeeming our image for growth with determination and a new sense of purpose.

The last but important subject to broach is the emoluments for our agents. We have both full-time and part-time, or tent-maker ministers. As a policy, there is no full-time catechist in the PCG. Until recently, most of our ministers were coming from Ghana and the Church paid them their stipend at home and their districts and congregations in Europe gave them allowances. At the moment, the policy is that all our ministers are paid here in Europe. Yet, there is no uniform policy, districts, and congregations are left to determine what to do for agents. Neither stipends nor allowances are discussed and decided in a structured regulated way. This Session is being called upon to take steps to put in place a proper regime of remuneration that addresses the following:

- Decent stipendiary levels;
- Uniformity;
- Fair relativities regarding:
 - Full-time and part-time;
 - Length of service;
 - Qualifications;
 - Office/position/responsibility;
 - Etc.

The Presbytery Finance Department must consult the PCG Finance Department at the Church House in Accra for guidance on this. There is already a structure that must be adapted and adopted. A couple of years ago the North America – Australia Presbytery settled these matters. We cannot leave these matters hanging forever.

Conclusion

May the God of all graces bestow on the Europe Presbytery the revival fire of Pentecost and release a new lease of love and power to drive our ministry and mission in Europe.

God bless you all as you deliberate on issues at this Session to bring glory to God and advance the cause of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.