

Editorial: Critique of the American church from the global majority

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Global Christianity is sending a clear message to the American church. Will we listen?

A rebuke from Africa

[Dr. Jerry P. Kulah](#), dean of the Gbarnga School of Theology at the United Methodist University in Liberia, spoke the following words during a breakfast at the recent United Methodist Church General Conference.

Take a few minutes to read and absorb what he said.

“[P]lease hear me when I say as graciously as I can: we Africans are not children in need of western enlightenment when it comes to the church’s sexual ethics. We do not need to hear a progressive U.S. bishop lecture us about our need to ‘grow up.’ ...

“Unfortunately, some United Methodists in the U.S. have the very faulty assumption that all Africans are concerned about is U.S. financial support. Well, I am sure, being sinners like all of you, some Africans are fixated on money.

“But with all due respect, a fixation on money seems more of an American problem than an African one. We get by on far less than most Americans do; we know how to do it. I’m not so sure you do. So if anyone is so naïve or condescending as to think we would sell our birthright in Jesus Christ for American dollars, then they simply do not know us. ...

“Friends, not too long ago my country was ravaged by a terrible civil war. And then we faced the outbreak of the Ebola virus. We are keenly familiar with hardship and sorrow, but Jesus has led us through every trial. So nothing that happens over the next few days will deter us from following him, and him alone.

“We will persevere in the race before us. We will remain steadfast and faithful. And someday we will wear the victor’s crown of glory with our King Jesus! Come walk with us!”

[Jake Raabe](#) directed me to Kulah’s statement, in which Kulah expresses very clearly what I have heard in one way or another for years.

American church, we are not the best Christians on the planet

When my wife and I were self-supporting missionaries at the University of New Mexico in the mid-2000s, we interacted with many international students, quite a few of whom were Christians.

A man from Africa told us the church in Africa prays for American Christians because we are weak.

The idea wasn’t new to me, nor was I ignorant of the difference between being a Christian in the United States and being a Christian in so many other places. But his straightforward statement that American Christians are weak was sobering.

As a child, I heard Africa spoken of monolithically, as though every person on that great continent is alike. They are not. Africa is an enormous continent with 54 countries, over 3,000 ethnic groups and more than 2,100 languages.

Part of the monolithic narrative was that Africans as a whole live in spiritual darkness. Therefore, we (Americans) need to send missionaries to them (Africans) to teach them the gospel. And that's what our forebears did; they sent missionaries to Africa to teach them the Bible and convert Africans to Christianity.

As an adult, I heard directly from African people that Americans live in spiritual darkness. Therefore, Christians all over Africa need to send missionaries to America to teach us the gospel. And that's what they are doing, sending missionaries to us to teach us the Bible and convert us to Christ.

When missionaries beget missionaries

In the early 2000s, I read *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* by Philip Jenkins. Few books have made such a deep and lasting impression on me. It happens to be the only book I've spilled coffee on.

Jenkins presented data showing the exponential rise of Christianity in Africa, Asia and South America. He also wrote about missionaries from the South and East being sent to re-evangelize the North and West. That's hemispheres, not regions of the United States.

I remember reading in another book about Chinese Christians who considered their persecution in China as preparation for taking the gospel to Islamic nations throughout Central Asia.

The robust theology and rock-solid dedication to Christ of non-Western Christians confront me when I read or hear such accounts. So many non-Western Christians have lived with enough hardship that they aren't the least bit worried about—though they are saddened by—what some in the West think of their supposedly immature understanding of the Bible.

In word and deed, global Christianity is telling the American church: “We are far more mature than you think. In fact, we are mature enough to know it is you who need to grow up.”

Kulah and others in the global church are telling the American church much more, which will be the subject of my [next editorial](#).

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