

Voices: The significance of the church outside the United States

March 6, 2019

You've probably heard by now about the United Methodist Church's [vote](#) regarding the denomination's stance on same-sex marriage.

You may not have heard about a second story that ran alongside and intersected with it—that of the African Delegation and Africa's growing influence in the United Methodist Church.

The African Delegation was a group of about 200 African Methodists who were able to attend this year's conference due to the fundraising efforts of The Africa Initiative, an informal network of African Methodist clergy and laity founded in 2008 to help organize African Methodists to become better represented at UMC general conferences.

The 200-person delegation was nearly unanimous in its support for the traditional plan, as the more conservative view of marriage is by far the majority position among African Christians.

The traditional plan won by a slim margin of just 54 votes. The measure would not have passed without the African votes.

In fact, the total number of votes cast in favor of the traditional plan was 438. If every African delegate voted for the plan—the actual number is surely a bit less than 200, as not all of the delegates were eligible to vote—African delegates represented nearly half of the successful vote.

Christianity's global shift

Don't miss the significance here.

According to a recent [Pew study](#), about 60 percent of American Methodists support same-sex marriage. As best as I could tell, going into the general conference, the majority of American Methodists preferred the One Church plan, which would have allowed individual churches to decide whether to affirm same-sex marriage or not.

American Methodists did not get their way in this vote *because of non-American voters*.

This is well in line with global trends. There are more Christians in Africa than in North America. [A lot more](#).

In fact, South America, Asia and Africa all have more Christians than either North America or Europe.

"The West" is no longer the global center of Christianity.

For all our talk of the decline of the American Church, Christianity isn't in decline worldwide. It simply has moved to the majority world. Given this, it is of little surprise that non-American voices were the deciding factor at the 2019 UMC General Conference.

Global voices—especially African—are taking on roles quickly as global leaders within the Church.

This phenomenon is by no means contained to Methodist life. Baptists already have had a similar experience.

Last year's Illumination Project proposal—a change to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's hiring policies in relation to practicing LGBT

individuals—noted the overwhelming non-affirming consensus of CBF’s global partners as a reason for the [proposal’s](#) conservative concessions.

African voices weigh in

The rise of the global church is not something to get ready for in Baptist life. It is here and dramatically evident. We would do well to listen to it.

American Christians recognizing the rise of the global church should be welcomed as a painful-but-fruitful time to consider the degree to which our culture has shaped, often improperly, our understanding of the gospel.

Dr. Jerry P. Kulah, dean of [Gbarnga School of Theology](#) in Monrovia, Liberia, wrote a strongly worded [editorial](#) to this effect shortly before the general conference.

Kulah did not mince words in critiquing what he saw as a lack of global and historical perspective among American Christians: “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.’”

Kulah had words just as strong for American Christians’ propensity to allow money to enter into these decisions, something seen on both the traditional and progressive sides, saying: “[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.”

Are we ready for global Christianity?

Kulah’s words are strong, but they deserve to be heard because they were spoken by a seminary president and leader among African Methodists.

Read the full article, and keep an eye out for any commentary you might come across from non-American Christians. As the UMC General Conference showed us, the thoughts and opinions of non-American Christians matter for all of us and quickly are becoming the majority voices in the global church.

Are we ready to accept this work of the Spirit?

Are American Christians ready to accept they are no longer the most influential voice in the global church?

After decades of pitying Africa and sending missionary after missionary there, are we now ready to see African Christians as missionaries to us?

Ready or not, the reality is here. It's true of [every branch](#) of Christianity in America.

The Holy Spirit has moved, and he has moved powerfully. The problem for us is that he has moved in other parts of the world.

What happened at this year's UMC General Conference has significance reaching beyond that of the vote on same-sex marriage. It was a dramatic assertion of a present reality: The rise of world Christianity in the majority world over and above "the West."

Are we ready to accept what historian Mark Noll calls "The New Shape of World Christianity?"

Judging by the failure of American commentators to grasp the significance of the African vote at this year's convention, I don't think we are. Our worldview is as American-centric as ever.

But ready or not, here it is.

Jake Raabe is a student at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological

Seminary in Waco, Texas. He is also a co-founder of [Patristica Press](#), a Waco-based publishing house.