

Church in Society (Lecture Notes)

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Church in Society

**Notes from a presentation by Rev. Dr. Kennedy Gondongwe
United Theological Seminary, Harare**

The lecture begins with a few recommended authors, I do not catch them all but they include Jonathan Draper, and Jean and John Commaroff based in Chicago.

There are different theories of engagement. Typically it is viewed that there was an assimilation of European Culture in the African Church but it was a two way process. African's were not passive recipients but a hybrid emerged that involved giving and receiving of the two cultures. The church in Zimbabwe was not just given but it was also received and a recipient of Zimbabwe culture.

Church and Education

First we consider the contribution of the church in terms of education.

The book, *Missionaries Go Back Home*, is recommended for further reading.

There is a theory or, as Dr. Gondongwe expressed, an accusation of missionaries coming with the colonialism. There is a clear link between the location of the Anglican cathedral and Methodist church 100m from parliament in Harare.

The missionaries needed protection provided by the colonialists but they brought education. The whole system now in place of schools, colleges and universities, the entire education system in Zimbabwe is a long lasting bi-product of the missionaries. Initially the

government only permitted the teaching of basic English and utility tasks but not engineering, medicine, etc. This was a utility based education to make the black Zimbabweans work for the whites.

There was a void in education between blacks and whites and it was the churches stepped in to the gap; all of the nationalist, independence leaders learned for free in the schools run by churches. The best lawyers, doctors, etc. started out in church schools and therefore the contribution of the church was to educate the pioneers who were equipped and empowered to bring forth independence. Nelson Mandela (even the name Nelson) is a product of missionary education. With the education black African's saw and questioned the system that was oppressing them. Without the contribution of missionary endeavours the country would remain without technology, etc.

In 1974 many schools were closed to try to quell the uprising of independence. In a country where there were only 9 or 10 schools there was bottleneaking and the best students rose up. This meant that by 1990 Mugabe was able to boast that his cabinet had 10 PhDs. Now the church is also providing first class universities.

Church and Health

In 1930's Dr. Osborne was specifically brought to Rhodesia from Britain to address the issue that hospitals were empty. Africans would only come if they had tried every traditional healer and were in a critical condition or if they knew they were already well and just wanted an extra check up. Dr. Osborne turned the wards into class rooms and taught so that people understood about modern medicines and treatments, therefore church hospitals grew and health improved. Mission hospitals led the way in national health ministry.

Church and Leadership

The first president of Zimbabwe was a Methodist Minister. The church gave leaders to the nations because of the education systems and roles within churches. However, they also gave the model of staying in leadership for ever.

The Catholic Church with the model of leadership from appointment to death is replicated in the political leadership. The church provided leaders but a legacy of a poor model for leadership. The church provides leaders but not a good model. The difference with political leaders is that terms of appointment are required that limit time in office. Church leadership is not accountable to the people; consequently the learned model of leadership is a lack of accountability to the people.

A poor theology is a culprit to the politics rather than able to speak into politics. People are made to do all kinds of things – eat grass, hold snakes – to demonstrate faith. Fake prophets are the richest guys in town because they give people what they want not what they need.

Church and Gender

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe celebrated its first ordained female minister 1977. The Methodist Church was speaking inclusion and gender equality long before others. However, forty years on and women are still sidelined in ministry. Other denominations are still not inclusive but the church in other areas is leading the way in female leadership.

Church and Politics

Church and politics is a real problem area. Those speaking up for justice are being banned from speaking or visiting countries. Their churches and denominations do not want to upset the government because they gain favour from them. Conversely two campaigns (Save Zimbabwe Campaign and Zimbabwe Christian Alliance), for example, are challenging the government to give people freedom.

Problems with church and politics:

The Church and the regime become too close and so the church becomes a spokesperson for the regime. Leaders are lifted up like saints and testimonies are given about them. The church gets married to the rich but the rich will never give to the church.

The Church becoming the opposition to the state is also dangerous.

The Church should be prophetic – speaking out and celebrating what is right and condemning what is wrong. The Catholic Church is always ahead. The Protestants are following the Catholics on this. When the church does not speak up for others no one will speak up for the church.

There is much to learn from Brazil and other South American churches about being a church for others. The role of the church is not to evangelize the world but to minister to all.

What are we as a church doing for the poor? We have got so many poor people in our churches and they have been made poor by the system. What is wrong in terms of power and money?

The church and the theological colleges are guilty of not teaching how to minister with the poor. The church is not equipping with the skills needed. We know the theology of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli

but not our own context and theology. We can learn and quote Shakespeare but not know our communities or the authors speaking into the now. We are failing.

Question and Answer Session

- If so much is learned from an oppressive regime (education, health, etc.) does the learned model for these also get copied? If so much is learned from an oppressive regime (education, health, etc.) does the learned model for these also get copied?

Every regime resembles the one it replaces.

Recently Zimbabwe changed its school syllabus. People cried foul. It wasn't changed to modify but to make the recipient docile. Islam is gaining prominence in the school curriculum because Christian doctrine is seen as dangerous.

The challenge to the church is how does it respond to the current regime. Martin Luther King said – no dictator gives freedom, the people must demand freedom; the church must speak for the people.

The current regime speaks of the second republic, there is no second republic, they are simply dressing the same woman in different clothes.

- How do you know the prophetic voice is correct?

You must have a framework of justice! Be guided by the principal of justice!

The Protestant Church silences those who wish to speak up, the Catholic Church does not.

- What is wrong with our church leaders? What are they trying to preserve – the church? Jesus? What? I don't know!

The church silences people when they become dangerous and are deemed to be a risk to the church.

In 2008 50 people camped in the college chapel because they were afraid in their villages. The principal looked to churches for support, for food and other essentials. The poor churches gave. The wealthy churches said they didn't want to give as the people may be dirty or corrupt or bring trouble. Ministers have ties with regime so they don't want them to be broken.

How do ministers convince the people to sacrifice themselves for the poor?

Bonhoeffer, you must be prepared to die. You don't have to stand on a side of politics you must stand on the side of justice. People don't want to sacrifice they want to know what is in it for them.

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