

Pastor Keith E. Wiens
Text: None

January 17, 2010
Epiphany 2

THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

We are now in the season of Epiphany season. This season reminds us that Christ is for all people. Even as an infant, Christ was revealed as the Savior of people in every nation when the Magi came from the east to worship him. Jesus accomplished this salvation through his death and resurrection.

People all over the world now follow Christ. In the next several weeks we want to take a look at the church around the world. Today we take a look at the church in Africa. We get a good insight into what is happening there when we hear the story of Musimbi.

Musimbi is a first generation Lutheran. He became a Lutheran at the age of 13 when he began his secondary education in a Lutheran Mission School in Kenya. Like many other Africans, he became a Lutheran because he went to a Lutheran school. There he heard of Christ and was baptized. As an adult Musimbi said that his experience at that school changed the course of his life. Musimbi later became the General Secretary for the World WYCA.

There are now over 15 million Lutherans in Africa, many of whom became Lutherans in a manner similar to the way Musimbi did. They became Lutheran through the outreach of schools, development projects, or hospitals. The social services of the Lutheran churches in Africa are its strongest witness. People often join the church because they have felt the love and compassion of God through the help they receive from these agencies.

Social ministry is important in Africa where people are hurting in many ways. Africa is a continent where people are thirsting for education. A majority of the people in the churches are not literate. Seventy percent of the people who attend church faithfully are women and children. And they are poor. And poor people have to deal with being marginalized, excluded, and have little or no voice in society. Poverty present a great challenge to the church in Africa.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is also presenting an urgent challenge to the church. Worldwide, 100 million people have been infected by HIV/AIDS. Two-thirds of all of these are Africans. Every day, Africa loses 8,000 lives to AIDS. Increasingly, it is women and children who are infected. How does the church talk about God in the face of such suffering? The church in Africa is learning to speak about God not apart from the people's sufferings and struggles, but in the midst of it.

While the challenges facing the church in Africa are great, so is the spirit of the people. The people dare to live in hope. Musimbi said that he rarely finds Africans doubting God because of their suffering. Rather, they have a strong belief that God is with them in the midst of their suffering.

This belief is grounded in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. They have learned that God took on flesh and blood in the person of Jesus and came to live among people like them. They have learned that God came to share in the struggles and suffering of people. They have learned that God was willing even to suffer and die on the cross for them. This gives them much hope.

They understand this action of God as grace. Out of grace and mercy for the people, God came to live among them. Out of grace and mercy, God went to the cross. And out of grace and mercy, God will continue to be with the people in their struggles and their suffering. The people of Africa have hope for the future, a hope that springs from the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

As the letter to the Philippians says, “though he was in the form of God, Christ did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)

Such a message about the willingness of Christ to enter into human suffering resonates with the people of Africa as they deal with the life and death issues of poverty and illness.

The letter to the Ephesians says, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6)

There is one body and one Spirit. The Christians in Africa are our sisters and brothers. They are part of the Body of Christ, just as we are. As such they have gifts to share with us, as we heard today in the reading from First Corinthians. It seems to me that one of their gifts to us is that they can teach us the importance of ministering to people who are suffering.

There are many people who need us. There are people in our own community who need us. There are homeless people. There are people struggling with physical and mental illnesses. There are hungry people. More and more people are coming to our food pantry. These people need our help.

And there are people far away who need us as well. Right now the people of Haiti need us. They need our prayers and they need our contributions of money and supplies. The ministry to people who are suffering is the work of Christ. The people of Africa are making a bold witness through their social ministry. They have set the bar high. We can learn from them and their example.

It all starts with Christ who was born in Bethlehem, who was baptized in the Jordan River, who turned water into wine, who fed the hungry and healed the sick, who died on the cross and rose from the dead. He did it for the people of Africa and he did it for you and me. May his Spirit dwell in us and lead us to serve the least among us.