

Bearing Faithful Witness to Jesus Christ in the 21st Century

By Rob Weingartner

God is at work in the world in amazing ways as Jesus' followers bear faithful witness to him.

Take Ethiopia, for example, where in the last fifty years the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, our partner there, comprised of both Presbyterian and Lutheran synods, has grown from 50,000 to 5.6 million members. As the late Harold Kurtz put it, "The Holy Spirit is out of control!"

When I asked a group of Mekane Yesus leaders how they accounted for their church's dynamic growth, they immediately affirmed that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. When asked what that work looks like in the life of their congregations, they replied, "People say we pray a lot because we are so poor."

I had to think about that for a while. How does a radical, prayerful dependence upon the provision of God in a context of great need drive the growth of the church? Paul Pierson, dean emeritus and Senior Professor of History of Mission and Latin American Studies at Fuller Seminary, describes the context in which new Christian communities are arising around the world this way: "Often they are born in situations of poverty, persecution, and corruption in which the Gospel is heard as incredible good news, a word of hope and meaning to people who have lacked both.... They take seriously the powerful work of God today and the victory of Jesus Christ over evil and death."

The Ethiopian leaders went on to describe how they have been a persecuted church and that were it not so, they would be more careless.

The Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba has known persecution, too. Yet when the Cuban constitution was changed from atheist to secular and some of the controls on the churches were relaxed, faithful followers of Christ began reaching out in new and creative ways. The Cuban churches are growing as new people come to faith in Christ.

Part of what characterizes Cuban believers' witness to the gospel is the way they hold together proclamation, compassion and justice as essential dimensions of Christian witness. Too often we in the U.S. have fallen into debate about whether evangelism (words) or acts of compassion (deeds) are more important. It is a false, debilitating debate. As retired missionary and professor Sam Moffett reminds us: "Without deeds the good news is scarcely credible. Without the word the news is not even comprehensible."

The church is not growing everywhere, and for the most part the places where the church is in decline are places where the church enjoys comfort and prosperity. So it was encouraging to me to see the recent example of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, a PC(USA) partner in a relatively prosperous context.

The PCK felt that their church was flagging in zeal for evangelism and needed a revival of the passion that has marked them through the years. PCK Moderator Sam Whan Kim called for what he termed a "Three Million Souls Movement"

to move the number of active participants in the PCK from 2.7 million to 3 million. A national campaign was held, beginning in November 2008, with special meetings in churches, presbyteries and among groups of men, women and young adults. A former moderator, the Rev. Dr. Young Ro Ahn, was the coordinator of a campaign that was grounded in prayer and focused on building relationships that would become bridges for bearing witness to Christ. The PCK reached its goal early last year, two and one-half years ahead of schedule!

As we work with our global partners to help build their capacity for evangelistic witness, whether they are in situations of explosive growth or in settings where the witness to the gospel is threatened, and as we share in reaching out to unreached peoples and unbelieving neighbors, we can learn from our partners. Their faithful example can help us to discover what respectful, holistic witness to Christ can look like in our own communities. And that is important because it is now just as likely that a young person in one of our suburbs does not know the gospel as a young person in much of the rest of the world.

The first Great End of the Church remains "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind" (*Book of Order*, G-1.0200). Our privilege as Christ's witnesses is well expressed in the 201st General Assembly's (1989) wonderful definition of evangelism — "joyfully sharing the good news of the sovereign love of God and calling all people to repentance, to personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, to active membership in the church, and to obedient service in the world."

In his final words to the disciples Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

That makes sense to me. As our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world consistently remind us, there is only one thing to do with good news—share it!

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The Outreach Foundation of the Presbyterian Church is a Validated Mission Support Group in covenant relationship with the General Assembly Mission Council of the PC(USA). Its mission is to engage Presbyterians and global partners in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Learn more at www.theoutreachfoundation.org

