

Edinburgh 1910. But Why Edinburgh?

What did the Scottish missionary tradition have to say to the first great ecumenical (when the word itself was unfamiliar) gathering of the post-Reformation Church as it took time to consider its place and its relationships after a century and a quarter of the modern missionary movement?

The Scottish Church was not the first in the field as it sought to respond to “the Great Commission”. But it was not long before William Carey was followed by others from Scotland. There were however other influences at work also. The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria celebrates its beginning with the arrival of the first missionary party from Scotland, led by the Rev. Hope M. Waddell (an Irishman), in the town of Calabar at the mouth of the Cross River, (the name Nigeria had not yet been thought up) on the 10th April 1846. But that first party consisted entirely of people who had already been missionaries in Jamaica and a number of Jamaicans who, ever since the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the subsequent emancipation of all the slaves in Jamaica, had been considering how they could help to take the Gospel back to the continent from which their forebears had been transported. The decision as to where they should go came as the result of a warm invitation, in the form of a letter written in pidgin English, from King Eyamba of Calabar to start work in his area. (None of the local languages had been reduced to writing before the missionaries came, though within six months of their arrival they had already printed the first vocabulary and catechism in Efik on the printing presses they had brought with them.) But long before their arrival was possible they had first of course to persuade the Church in Scotland to allow and indeed to sponsor their enterprise.

So in 1846 the mission began, and it was nearly a hundred years later, in 1942, that I was appointed to Calabar. Although I had been born and brought up in Korea on an Australian mission field until the age of 14, including three years at a China Inland Mission boarding school in Chefoo, China, I knew very little of the work in Calabar. When I was informed that my work would be mainly teaching, I pointed out that I had no teaching qualifications, having done an ordinary arts degree in French and German and then theological training in New College, Edinburgh, and I was reminded or rather told that probably none of the teachers at my two boarding schools in China and England would have had any formal teacher training. The Foreign Mission Committee did however later grant me an extended first leave so that I could take the Teacher’s Diploma at the Colonial Department of the Institute of Education in London.

Within a year I found myself on the staff, very much depleted as a result of the War, of one of the oldest secondary schools in Nigeria, which had drawn its pupils from different parts of the country. The full Hope Waddell Training Institution (H.W.T.I.) at that time consisted of the school (primary including Efik and Igbo beginners departments, and secondary), the Teacher Training College and three industrial departments (printing, carpentry and engineering) offering four year apprenticeships. Most of the boys, all the student teachers and the apprentices were boarders. There was still no university college in Nigeria

though the Elliott Commission, was pointing out the need for one. But there were some members of the (non-H.W.T.I.) mission staff who were slightly suspicious of what seemed to them the “elitist” character of the Institution. By this time probably most of the schools in Southern Nigeria were in the hands of the different missions though paid for by Government grants.

This is not the place for an account of the gradual expansion of the work up the Cross River with the building of churches and schools and training facilities for evangelists and women-workers and eventually ministers. Some medical work was also started early and indeed concern about and treatment of leprosy was largely pioneered by the missions with well recognized results. In the course of time joint-mission hospitals became an important part of the country’s medical services. But from the beginning the ongoing work of translating the Bible into Efik and later, in collaboration with other missions, into Igbo was important. So education continued to take a high priority in mission planning, though the news reaching the home Church might be more about the tackling of social problems like the tradition of killing twin babies or leaving them in the bush to die.

Before the establishment of the H.W.T.I. it was in fact a letter from Mary Slessor which first drew attention to the need for some formal industrial training. She pointed out the almost infinite potential of Nigerian timber and the incongruity of importing Scandinavian timber. (The first two main buildings of the Institution were prefabricated in Scotland before being brought out and erected in Calabar. At least one of these buildings was still in full use a hundred years later.)

Edinburgh 1910 had in fact very little to say about Africa and very few of the delegates had any African experience, but even before 1910 the first moves towards inter-mission co-operation had begun with a meeting in Calabar in 1907. The “comity of missions” agreement ensured that as far as possible missions should not overlap in their areas of work, and the vision of a united Church then began to take shape with co-operation between Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians.

Throughout my 17 years in Nigeria this movement towards a united Church, first in Eastern Nigeria and then in the whole country, was an important part of our concern. It had been encouraged by a visit in 1956 by Bishop Hospet Sumitra, Moderator of the Church of South India, whose Scheme of Union we were following. (This was before the Church of North India.) This co-operation had already led to four important joint establishments in Eastern Nigeria: a Woman’s (teacher) Training College, a Rural Training Centre, Trinity (union) Theological College and finally the Queen Elizabeth (training) Hospital.

Trinity College, Umuahia, where candidates for the ministries of the three Churches were trained together and where I was stationed for my last four years in Nigeria, represented the most significant degree of co-operation in ways which could not have been envisaged by our home Churches. Sadly when Western Nigeria, where apart from the Roman Catholics only Anglicans and Methodists were working, came into our scheme, the joint negotiations became more difficult and they finally broke down when the Methodists adopted their own Episcopal form of government with bishops and then a "patriarch". Some years later even Trinity College ceased to be a union college and became purely Anglican. So in spite of what was actually fulfilled in South and North India, and in Canada and Australia, Church Union in Nigeria seemed further away than ever.

Fifteen years before the independence of Nigeria in 1960, independence for which the Colonial government had been preparing very effectively, the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Nigeria had itself become an independent Church within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and those of us who had been ministers of the Church of Scotland transferred our ministry to the Nigerian Church. I believe that since 1910 and apart from the failure to achieve any further degree of unity among the Churches, the general direction of the Nigerian Presbyterian Church has been in accord with the principles of the Edinburgh 1910 Conference. And they have, unlike Scotland itself and Korea, managed to avoid the Presbyterian tendency to split up into separate groupings – always on matters of principle!

The Church's emphasis on high standards in education and social concern was important in preparing for Independence in 1960 and we were proud that the position of Governor of Eastern Nigeria went to Sir Francis Ibiem who was then the Principal of the Hope Waddell Institution.

But perhaps we had not done enough to encourage the development of worship in more naturally African ways of music and dance. Did we spend too long in trying to introduce liturgical forms of worship adapted from the 1940 Book of Common Order? And did we adequately answer those who queried why the Church forbade polygamy, which was not forbidden in the Bible, and yet introduced divorce which was specifically condemned in the Bible?

My time in Nigeria came to an end for family reasons in 1960, but I was glad to be able to go back on a visit in 1995, when invited to share in the celebration of the centenary of H.W.T.I. By then the Institution had grown substantially, and the Presbyterian Church had congregations in many parts of the country where there had not previously been any Presbyterians. In the town of Calabar itself, where there had been only one Cathedral (Roman Catholic), there were now four Cathedrals, (R.C., Anglican, Methodist and "African Church"). And I saw three new statues of Mary Slessor!

But during those years Nigeria had gone through the tragic period of the Biafran War, now known as the Civil War. One of the unforeseen consequences of this

was the end of the direct Scottish mission connection with the Church. Our mission area had been almost exclusively within the Biafran enclave (largely the oil rich part of the country) which had tried to secede from the Federation of Nigeria, and those of our mission staff who were there at the time had inevitably become closely involved with refugee and famine relief in the Biafran area. After the defeat of the Biafran cause, they were no longer acceptable to the Nigerian authorities or allowed to remain. Some Canadians and others from the Netherlands continued for a while to work with the Nigerian Presbyterian Church, but in effect the direct appointment of missionary partners to Calabar came to an end in 1970, some 124 years after the arrival of the pioneers from Jamaica. As has happened in other countries the departure of missionary partners was followed by the growth and further expansion of the local Church.

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(1707 words)