

THE AFRICAN LEADERSHIP LETTER

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THE RELEVANCE OF THE GOSPEL TO PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY

Poverty is quite prevalent as is seen in the informal settlements mushrooming in most urban areas. This is apart from the traditional areas where they have lived in poverty even before independence. In urban areas, extreme poverty is evident in inequalities of access to social infrastructure including education and health care. Other features of extreme poverty in rural areas include low income, social exclusion and vulnerability to disasters and diseases.

Primary causes of poverty, however, include unemployment, inflation, debt, corruption, extreme weather, lack in control of local food, lack of access to education, mental illness, World Hunger, epidemic diseases, automation, unemployment, overpopulation, a high divorce rate, ignorance, among others. There are historical causes too, which are slavery, war and conquest. All these factors promote and establish poverty among people.

Poverty reduction is attainable by the combined effort of the government and the people. One may ask of the culture and religious leanings of the people living in poverty.

Christianity is the largest religion in Ghana with approximately 71.2% of Ghana's population being Christians. However, religious tolerance is very high giving freedom to worship according to one's beliefs. As a predominantly Christian country, the gospel becomes so relevant to the Christian life, as Christians continue to

apply the Bible to their lives. With the persistent trend of the extended family system, the gospel impacts Christian and non-Christian family members alike.. The relevance of the gospel therefore cannot be underestimated. Some churches and prayer camps continuously welcome other faiths like Moslems and Traditionalists. They come there with the aim of finding rest from their problems. The Moslem who comes to church is prepared to embrace the guidelines to follow without question.

This analysis of poverty and its subsequent reduction go to inform the relevance of the gospel to people living in poverty.

Both primary and historical causes of poverty have roots in the gospel message.

We blame the poor, mock them often, and demonize them for not striving hard enough.

Regarding the poor, Jesus says 'Give to everyone who begs from you (Matthew 5: 42). Jesus ministers with and among the poor and proclaims to them the good news concerning himself (Luke 6:20; Matthew 11:2-6). Some churches are now adopting the holistic ministry of attending to physical as well as the spiritual needs of individual members of the church. Jesus fed the 5,000 (Matthew 14:15-21) who were in need (poor) giving them survival and by this, setting a ministry example for us to emulate.

God gives us everything we need (Matthew 6:25-33, 7:7-11) and it is evident that the Gospel is concerned about our needs. The

poor are in the divine thought of God to sustain them. The gospel therefore becomes relevant to the needs of the poor.

Poverty breeds inequality and discrimination, and the gospel affirms equality in gender, race, creed and status. God's choice of the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom of God, (James 2:1-13), gives ample evidence of His great favor for the poor.

The basis of our involvement with the poor is the rules of the gospel, namely substitutionary sacrifice, which mandates us to help the poor even if we think we can't afford it. The gospel encourages us to do ministry to the poor of every tongue, tribe, people and individual. Gospel ministry is not proclaiming it to people so that they will embrace it; it is also teaching and shepherding believers with it so that it shapes the entirety of their lives for them to live it out. The gospel affects our relationship to the poor. Christian leaders must take a keen look at the poor in our churches. Living and caring for the poor is so crucial and non-optional aspect of making the gospel available to the poor.

Some churches have little regard for the poor among them. The poor in the church only matter for statistics for foreign support. The poor leaves the church on Sunday, having very little money after giving all to church offerings. He is only hopeful for financial survival at the expense of the sermon message, which may be genuinely delivered or a flattery. The gospel invites the poor for rest, from worries, (Matthew 11:28).

Paul in Galatians 6: 2 enjoins us to bear one another's burdens, because Galatians 6:10 tells us to do good to all men (rich and poor) especially believers. Doing good includes practical aid to people who need food, shelter and financial help. The burdens comprise emotional strength for those in

sorrow. We can't help the poor without sacrificing and bringing the suffering upon ourselves; and that was the mandate of Jesus on the Cross to relieve us from our burdens. The gospel for the poor among us must bear the same significance to make it relevant to them. Most churches however have stepped up efforts to make the gospel relevant to the poor in this way, and it is a step in the right direction.

Radical, remarkable, sacrificial generosity to the poor is the way to live the gospel. We should be socially and emotionally emphatic in helping others, not only the destitute, but the ungrateful as well.

The gospel requires us to be involved in the life of the poor---not only financially, but personally and emotionally. Our giving must not be token but so radical that it brings a measure of suffering into our lives.

The descent of the Holy Spirit and the attendant growth in numbers (Acts 2: 41) is connected to the radical sharing with the needy (Acts 2: 44-45). Jesus spoke of giving money and clothing to those who ask, insisting that we should give without expecting anything in return (Luke 6: 32-35). The motivation for our aid is our Christian faith with the most famous biblical appeal to help the poor, being the 'mercy' shown in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 37).

In Matthew 25, God identifies with the poor symbolically and in the incarnation the death of Jesus identifies with the poor and marginal literally.

Jesus was born in a feeding trough and at circumcision, offered what was required of the poor (Luke 2:24). Jesus said, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head' (Matt 8: 20) to depict his struggles in life. The poor often have no abode. At the

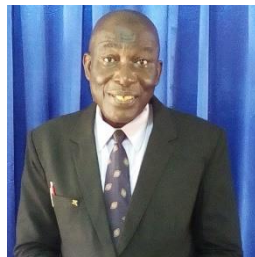
end of his life, he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, spent his last evening in a borrowed tomb, to establish want in poverty. They cast lots for his only possession, his robe, for there on the cross, he was stripped of everything; the poor have nothing to boast of.

Even in following Jesus the disciples fell in want, (Matthew 19: 27). But the good news in this situation was that, Jesus assures them of fullness of life both physical and spiritual (Matthew 19:29), '....will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.' This amply supports the readiness of the gospel to give hope to the poor.

Above all, poverty cannot be eradicated outside laziness. The gospel has examples

of lazy stewards who were punished (Matthew 25:26 – 30). Christians are admonished to work hard to survive.

In conclusion, the masses of Christians in poverty are rightly taken care of by the gospel. What remains is rightly dividing the Word to the benefit of the poor. This calls for seasoned preachers of hope to the poor in and outside of our churches. Jesus was with the poor and knew their condition and could rightly address them. Preachers must identify problems of the poor to be able to use the gospel to address them. To do this, we need to be closer to them. Some pastors live outside of, and beyond their flock. Some hardly try to find out the real needs of the poor in the church and instead blame their poverty on them. As Shepherds, care of the flock is a mandate, not an option.



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## **THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY IN AFRICA**

### **A. INTRODUCTION:**

According to various report by World Organisations that deal with humanitarian aid, relief and development, Africa is considered the poorest continent on earth. About one third of her population live below the poverty line and particularly affected are the weakest members of society, namely the children and women. The World Bank's 2014/2015 report reveals that 42.3% of the population in Sub Sahara Africa live on

\$1.90 or less per day, a principal factor of widespread poverty and hunger. As a result, Africa has the highest prevalence of under nourishment estimated in 2016 to be 20% of the population. Again, the top principle cause of hunger being poverty. (WFP Reports: 2018)

The church in Africa is a major host to millions of people comprising these stunning statistics, hence the need to discuss such a topic: The church's

response to the problem of poverty in Africa. The paper will provide a simple definition of poverty, discuss some indicators of poverty in the church in Africa, analyse some of the causes of poverty and provide simple suggestions on how the church in Africa can give a response.

Poverty can be defined by different schools of thought in many ways. However, in this paper, it will simply be the **lack of basic human needs**, which is the principle cause of hunger and disease in Africa as individuals living in poverty often cannot afford food of sufficient quality or quantity to live a healthy life.

## **B. INDICATORS OF POVERTY IN THE CHURCH IN AFRICA:**

The causes of poverty in Africa are many and deep rooted. It is a million-dollar question which cannot be adequately dealt with in one single response. Some of the documented causes include overpopulation, cultural mind sets and high levels of illiteracy and unemployment, corruption and poor government policies, unending conflicts, severe diseases, climate change and changing weather patterns, lack of investments, poor and unsuitable markets. (WFP Reports: 2018).

Suffice it to say that poverty is a virtual circle which traps people in perpetual poverty! It imposes a mental burden on individuals which makes it very difficult for them to think in deliberate ways that can promote a good life, better health, dignity, and self-worth. As a result of such a pronounced condition, the following are serious reflections on effects of poverty in the church in Africa:

- 1) Church workers, pastors and ministers are poorly supported. They are subjected to poverty both during their time of service and when they retire. The Church and members seem to

say, 'We hope God will somehow take care of you while serving and when you are too old to serve the church, your children will take care of you'.

- 2) Pastors and ministers are not able to support their families with decent shelter, clothes, nor education. Thankfully, most countries still provide free primary and secondary school education. However, college education is a real challenge for pastors' children and many young people in the church.
- 3) Qualified and potential church workers shun working for the church and opt to work for government or private companies related to the church which pay well and have good retirement benefits.
- 4) Most church members are themselves poor, and as such they cannot afford to support the church ministries and workers adequately. In most cases the members instead look to the church for support.
- 5) Poor giving patterns are set because members consider themselves poor, also leading to poverty in members lives as they lack God's blessings connected to giving. The Bible says, 'it is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35).

When the church in Africa was first established, all the support came from the headquarters in Europe or North America or whichever missionary agency that established that particular church. Through the missionaries, their sending churches provided for the needs of missionaries, the acquisition of property for the church, construction of buildings and any other support for

various church programs and church workers.

While this was necessary, and missionaries had very good intentions for providing everything the church needed, this created a mentality in members and Pastors that it was not their responsibility to support the church ministries and workers. The feeling was that whatever we need, will come from the homeland of missionaries.

- 6) Church infrastructure is in state of despair. Missions stations that were once shining examples of development with systems working when missionaries were in leadership are now in a state of disrepair and no longer attractive. Equipment that was functioning is grounded. The maintenance of infrastructure is almost non-existent. While some parts of the country are developing, the church's mission stations are actually going backward.

In my role as President of Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ), I had the privilege of visiting some mission stations of churches that are members of CCZ and the story is the same.

- 7) Lack of management and Investment skills. The church in Africa is very well prepared for heaven but lacks the knowledge to live in a better here on earth based on sound management and investment skills. Our training institutions are almost exclusively bent towards the spiritual side of the church. Training is only for pastors. National leaders find themselves lacking management and investment skills that would help them develop the church and her members. The

church needs both spiritual and leaders trained in other disciplines the church needs.

### **C. AS A RESULT OF THESE EFFECTS, WE SEE A COMPROMISED CORE MANDATE OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH**

First, as in the **Great Commission** (Mathew 28: 18:20). Poverty hinders the church from obeying the Great Commission. After being a mission field for over 100 years, the church in Africa is still behind the rest of the world-wide Church in terms of reaching out to unreached peoples in the world. African churches have only now woken up to the reality that they can send missionaries to the unreached peoples.

I was stunned by the current theme of the International Conference of the Wesleyan Church is 'From Everywhere to Everywhere'! What a challenge for the church in Africa where we seem to be saying 'From Everywhere to Africa'.

Poverty compromises the church's ability to witness for Christ as the church is often seen as a beggar by the rich in society.

In Zambia, a story is told of a pastor in a village who came to town to do business. He took longer in town than he had anticipated. After doing business, all the vehicles that carry passengers back to his village left him still in town. So, he decided to take the long walk back home hoping that a good Samaritan would pick him on the way.

After a while, a beer businessman came by carrying drums of beer on the back of the van. The pastor waved down the van and he was given a ride. The pastor took the opportunity to share the gospel with the businessman. As they were talking, the pastor opened his bible to share the word



and at this time, the businessman quickly interjected, 'If you are going to talk to me about the Bible, and God in my vehicle, then I will drop you off right here!' Then the pastor quickly answered, 'Please do not drop me off here, I was just joking'. And quickly put his Bible in his brief case. Can you imagine if the situation was the other round; the pastor was the one with the vehicle and the business man was asking for a ride?

Secondly, as in the **expectations of Jesus Christ for the Church** (Mathew 6:1-4, 25:31-46),

Jesus expected the disciples to be involved in charity work. How then can the church undertake charity work when she is poor? It is only when the church has resources that she will be able to do charity as expected of the Lord Jesus. This story once caught my attention:

In the United States of America, a turkey meal is central part of the Thanksgiving dinner. The Ransom Church bulletin of October 2018 had this announcement on November 10: "Turkey Give Away at 0830 am! Downtown Campus. Please come and help us to handout turkeys to our community: We are working with multiple schools and non-profit organisations to distribute 1200 turkeys to those who could benefit from such."

The Ransom Church is able to do charity work with great joy because they have resources.

#### **D. FOUR PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS ON HOW THE CHURCH IN AFRICA CAN RESPOND TO POVERTY:**

##### **1. Preach and Teach Biblical Stewardship:**

Poor giving is a major part of the poverty problem in the African church, especially those first planted by western Missionaries.

II Corinthians 8:1-11: The Macedonian Church were much poorer than the Corinthians, but made a very generous financial commitment. **Giving Is Key to Spiritual Growth.**

All of God's creation is in His image and designed to reflect Him. Poverty misrepresents the image of God in man as God is a giver, (John 3:16). A lifestyle without giving distorts God's image. *Giving fuels God's Spirit in the battle with fallen nature. All life works best when giving replaces getting.*

Therefore, a comprehensive preaching and teaching curriculum on biblical stewardship must be developed and implemented by each local church.

##### **2. Develop Church Business and Investment Ventures:**

The church can develop business and investment trusts to supplement the financial income and resources both for the church and also her members.

Poverty can be reduced as members access livelihood skills such as in agriculture for improved food security, carpentry and joinery, tailoring and design, bricklaying and many more. Through these business ventures, employment opportunities are made available. Also, church members will have additional resources to give towards support of Church workers and ministry.

##### **3. Creation of Partnerships:**

The Church can develop partnership with Government, non-governmental organisations and civic societies in areas of developmental projects, general and community health education, literacy programs, agricultural productivity and other areas aimed at poverty reduction.

Poverty alleviation includes improving the living conditions of people who are already poor and whose conditions can easily change as mind sets are challenged.

Therefore, the Church should make deliberate efforts to create viable links in partnerships in order tap additional resources from organisations better placed with funding aimed at transforming and building better economies for the people, giving them value for their labour and productivity.

#### 4. Pray, Cancel the Spirit of Poverty:

The battle against poverty is both physical and spiritual. Most poverty in Africa is a cultural mind set from which people need to be delivered. The virtual circles of generational poverty should be broken through prayers.

The church should be alive to this fact and engage God will heal the blessed continent of Africa (II Chronicles 7:14).

### **CONCLUSION:**

Despite Goal # 2 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals developed in 2016, which strives for 'Zero Hunger' by 2030, poverty, hunger and malnutrition remains a large barrier of development in many regions, especially Africa. (Sources: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF WFP and WHO 2017: The Global state of Food Security and Nutrition: Building resilience For Peace and Food Security.)

Poverty is a complex problem that needs to be addressed at all levels of society by all possible means. A lot has been done, yet a lot more needs to be done. Africa is perhaps one of the richest continents in terms of natural resources endowed by our God Almighty. There is no justifiable reason to rank as the poorest in the world. The church in Africa needs to begin asking the right questions and rise to the challenge of addressing high poverty levels among her membership in Jesus Name. Amen!



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A LEADER'S TASK: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Spiritual Direction is an uncompromised path of a biblically minded organization. In the context of Christianity, spiritual direction refers to the guidance of the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit in order to apply the great commission mandate. Christians are entrusted with the responsibility to harvest souls from eternal death to eternal life. The issue of spiritual direction commenced just

before the ascension of Jesus Christ. Knowing the magnitude of the responsibility he left with his disciples, Jesus encouraged them not to stay in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit which would empower them for the task. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit Comes on You; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem

and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” Ac. 1:8.

Christians are produced as a result of the conviction of sinners by the Holy Spirit. Spiritual direction starts from the point of conversion of an individual to becoming a disciple producer. In his book, *Biblical Expository Preaching*, Dr. Stephen Olford, highlights that effective spiritual direction of a church is evidenced by the progression of a believer from the initial acceptance of Christ to total dependence on him and obedience to kingdom service. Spiritual guidance enables Christians to experience a true state of repentance to a state of separating good from evil with heavenly eyes. Heb. 5:14; 6:1

A church is identified as being spiritually directed if such church properly focuses on moral, social, spiritual and physical issues with her members. It is however sad to note that number of churches have to a great extent mismanaged the biblical concept of spiritual direction. Most leaders of the church have abandoned the primary issues and focused on secondary issues. Contemporary churches are classified as powerful when members are speaking in spiritual tongues; a high status of the choir, auxiliaries, executive board, welfare committee, music team, praise team and there is also a theologically qualified pastor or chairman of administration. Church authorities look for well-prepared statistics. Church leaders have moved away from the absolutes to the non-absolutes. Authorities have shifted from functions such as message (word of God), organism (believer), principles (doctrine) which will never change and put premium on forms and structures such as pattern, organization, method, and culture which change with time. Though forms and structures have place in the Church, yet, they must not be over emphasized. Both

forms and structures should be established based on their relevance and harmony with biblical functions. It is therefore important that authorities of the church revisit the placement of church activities, if spiritual direction is to be evidenced in the church today.

Addressing spiritual direction has to do with true teachings of scripture. A spiritually directed church starts with the pastor or preacher. The pastor must be a true convert with good quality of leadership character with due regard to his personal, social, moral, spiritual and emotional life in the church and society at large. His conduct, compassion and spiritual devotion must attract the congregation. This is in accordance with of Paul’s instruction to Timothy. “Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” 1Timothy 4:12.

The pastor who influences his members with spiritual standards can produce a church with a high standard of spiritual growth. The fruits of humility and a gentle attitude, the spirit of unity, love, patience, fellowship and care for one another will be outstanding among members. Believers must be provided with relevant learning experiences with the word of God, relational experiences with God and others as well as corporate and personal witnessing experiences with the unsaved world. The apostle Paul said to the people of Corinth: “To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” 1Corinthians 9:22

A Spiritually directed church does not focus on anything other than the Lordship of Christ over creation. Neither artificial influence nor demonic and natural depression can move members away from the church when they are well fed with the

word of God. A spiritually directed church embraces the belief that Christ is supreme over the universe and therefore members will steadfastly serve him in all respects. A spiritually directed church is engaged with sound biblical messages, discipleship training, missions, evangelism/witnessing, visitation, fellowship, prayer meetings, breaking of bread, revival services, open year service, crusades etc. A spiritually directed Church should be glued with sound expository preaching. Members will be strongly devoted to the things of God if they are attracted with authentic and dynamic messages. A church where the word of God is rightly handled produces members with sincere repentance and remorse. A spiritually directed church is focused on producing disciple. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19

In terms of managing a church, a spiritually directed church addresses the whole

congregation including individuals, married couples, family members, elders and the whole team of believers. Marriage shows love and submissive attitude between husband and wife; family shows husband and wife servanthood and church shows pastor and elders service to multiple fathers, mothers and families.

The aspect of spiritual direction in a Church will not be fully addressed if prayer is not discussed. Prayer precedes missions, evangelism, soul winning and Church planting. Prayer should sandwich the entire members, programs and projects of a church. The ministry of Jesus portrayed prayer as a key element for a spiritually directed church. At the commencement of his ministry Jesus prayed (Mat. 4:2) and at the end of his ministry Jesus prayed. (Lk. 23:46). Stephen Olford said: "pray when you feel like it! Pray when you don't feel like it! Pray until you feel like it!"



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