

# THE AFRICAN LEADERSHIP LETTER

A Joint Publication of the African Wesleyan Fellowship and the Africa Area Office of Global Partners

Vol.3 No.3

November, 2014

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE BOOK OF PHILEMON FOR THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHURCH

### Introduction:

Most scholars describe the epistle of Philemon as very unique.

It is a one-chapter epistle in English with 25 verses and 445 words in the KJV. The epistle has a three-verse introduction and a three-verse conclusion. It is a purely personal epistle with no explicit statement of doctrine.

According to George Arthur Buttrick, “the brevity of the epistle of Philemon sets it apart from other letters, being scarcely more than one page long with distinctive character and content.” This makes the epistle a very brief one.

William Barclay calls it “the only private letter of Paul which we possess” with Lewis B Radford also describing it as “the only strictly private letter in a collection of letters written either to churches or to individuals in positions of responsibility, to whom the Apostle has directions in matters of church life and work.”

Whereas Buttrick looks at the length of the epistle, others like Barclay and Radford look at the private aspect of it; portraying some distinctiveness with regard to the epistle, irrespective of how various scholars see it.

Some others like John Cereghin also describe it as a masterpiece of Christian tactfulness and politeness, and it has been called “the polite epistle”. Cereghin affirms Martin Luther’s view

of the epistle exhibiting “a right noble, lovely example of Christian love.”

Again, the epistle of Philemon has a unique character which gives insight into the social fabric of the New Testament Church. It does so especially in the relationship between masters and slaves and Paul bridges these differences in the light of the word of God. The multifaceted character of this epistle enables scholars to derive various characteristics, thereby making it unique to readers.

### Background:

Paul wrote the epistle to Philemon, his brother, (*ho adelphos*), in the Christian sense. This gives it a private-personal touch.

Onesimus had been one of Philemon’s slaves who possibly, robbed his master and fled to Rome. One can only conjecture how Onesimus came to Paul since no specific answer is given in that regard. Onesimus’ companionship was a comfort and strength to Paul the prisoner, until the need arose for Onesimus to go back to his master; to prove his penitence so as to be restored and pardoned, as was indicated in this particular epistle.

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The theme of Forgiveness-Reconciliation portrayed in this epistle is worth noting and emulating, in the contemporary church. Paul led this crusade of getting Onesimus forgiven and reconciled to his master, Philemon.

Paul as a church leader played a very prominent role in this regard with Onesimus and Philemon being key players as well.

### **Relevance of Philemon to the Contemporary Church:**

The epistle of Philemon has a lot to teach the church today.

Paul becomes an epitome of Jesus in the epistle of Philemon.

The epistle clearly indicates Paul's role as a type of Christ. Verse 18 states that, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." Paul indicates to Philemon that if Onesimus has hurt him in any way (*ei de ti edikesen se*: v. 18a transliterated, condition of the first class, assumed to be true); Onesimus did wrong ("*edikese*" first aorist active indicative of "*adikeo*" "to wrong without justice"); or if Onesimus owes him (Philemon) any amount of money (*e opheilei*: v. 18a transliterated) a delicate way of presenting the charge of stealing; Paul being so tactful. Paul then instructs Philemon to submit that bill of indebtedness to him (*touto emoi elloga*: v.18b transliterated). This is a perfect example of Christ's mission on earth to save sinful humanity.

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ever-ready forgiveness of God to them to repent (John 3:16) and get them reconciled to God for the salvation of their souls.

Paul took up the messed up person of Onesimus, spent time and effort to straighten him out and even went as far as to assume his past debts. This could be likened to Paul taking over Onesimus' debts with Philemon, just as Jesus did for us in our sins with God the Father. The contemporary church has the duty to evangelize the present world of diverse faiths. Christianity has the challenge of stiff competition in these beliefs and this has brought forth a lot of messed - up individuals of different faiths. The Church has the duty of winning such souls to Christ by spending time and effort to reach out through evangelism and physically helping them too. This is enshrined in the International Discipline of the Wesleyan Church, Chapter 1; 265-10 - 'Towards Others', and in this the church has a social responsibility. The epistle of Philemon does this perfectly as a noble example of Christian love.

Onesimus' willingness to go back to his wronged master, Philemon, depicts our conviction to go back to Jesus in our sinful and messed-up state; having wronged God by way sinning against him. This sets us up for our conversion and subsequent laying of our sins on the back of Jesus with God the Father; this notwithstanding the immense role of the Trinity in convicting and straightening us out.

On the whole, the importance of the epistle of Philemon in our sermons cannot be underestimated. Lessons abound in the epistle and it is important that much emphasis is placed on its reference like other books of the Bible, in our pulpits.

A good number of churches in Africa today are saddled with litigations that have set forth factions against themselves within same churches. Where the situation becomes unbearable and intolerable, affected church

members break up into splinter groups or factions that stand opposed to the mother church; and in some cases do so forever. This gives room for no forgiveness and reconciliation right in the vineyard of God. A faction leader might wrong the mother church and it will interest readers to know that none within the hierarchy of the church would ever be willing to initiate forgiveness and reconciliation. Some Christians may even prescribe perpetual feeling of strong dislike and opposition as a worthy deterrent to the behavior of the break-away factions. The epistle of Philemon speaks to such issues of forgiveness and reconciliation, if only church leadership will refer to and apply it.

Onesimus had inflicted pain on his master by way of possibly, stealing his valuables and escaping with them; an offence punishable by death at that time for a runaway slave like him. No slave master ever would harbor such a person. Paul was fully aware of such consequences for an offence of this nature, yet he braved it with the gospel message and won. One may ask if the disagreements in our cotemporary churches that give rise to non-forgiveness and non-reconciliation, far outweigh the offence of Onesimus that befell the household of Philemon. Of course, Onesimus did hurt the feelings of Philemon and hence the intervention of no less an important church official like Paul. Paul was willing to create a platform for forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is a lesson for our leadership of today who only castigate and heap scorn on the bad behavior of some converts. Onesimus' behavior could have been reported to the police or law courts by any contemporary church, considering the prevalence of crime rate in Africa. Paul decided to clean the mess in him and straighten him up for his own good and salvation in Christ. Onesimus was penitent in going himself with Tychichus to his master, Philemon. At times, disagreements which could

have otherwise been amicably resolved, are often fuelled by bad faith into chaos by leadership. Paul was simply for the good of Onesimus and nothing else.

At times, disagreements which could have otherwise been amicably resolved, are often fuelled by bad faith into chaos by leadership.

Jesus came to seek and to save lost souls, Luke 19:10. Ironically, such people in their sinful states do not often appeal to some churches of today. Such churches have put morality above sympathy for lost souls. Jesus was passionate in his dealings with sinners and the epistle of Philemon speaks to that. The woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11, had the sympathy of Jesus who neither condemned but asked her to leave her life of sin. Jesus does not condemn sinners since the hope of repentance is there for all. The church must be prepared to receive and straighten the lost and church leadership must spearhead this crusade. Paul is a perfect example of this attitude of Christ and he calls on all Christians to do same.

Finally, in issues of offence, Christians must more than be willing to pardon, forgive and reconcile offenders to themselves. The two great commandments which require us to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:36-39), enjoin us to practice love as Christians .

As we put on the spectacles of Paul toward others, simultaneously we must have the heart of Philemon to forgive and seek reconciliation with those who trespass against us. Converts must also have the heart of Onesimus so as to be able to surrender themselves in sin for forgiveness and reconciliation. The church must reach out to more Onesimuses to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission of going to make disciples of all people through forgiveness and reconciliation to Christ Jesus.



**Rev. Felix Kinful Baafi,  
Assistant National Superintendent,  
Wesleyan Church, Ghana.**

**Email: [kinbafex2001@yahoo.com](mailto:kinbafex2001@yahoo.com)**

## **A BIBLICAL ANSWER TO THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL**

The mentioning of the term “Prosperity Gospel” suggests that it is other than the biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, those who propagate it hardly preach about salvation and discipleship. This article shall therefore attempt to differentiate this “gospel” from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which has replaced the Gospel of Jesus Christ in many quarters of the Evangelical Community. Secondly, it shall attempt to discover the purpose of this new “gospel”.

The prosperity gospel could be defined or described as “the faith proclaiming gospel” or “name it and claim it”. Their teachings tell us that we can use the “power of faith” to create our own reality or get what we want.

“Teachings” of “Prosperity Gospel” (these are special marks or teachings of this “gospel” that distinguishes it from the Gospel of Jesus). Let us look at few teachings of the prosperity gospel and how the gospel of Jesus answers them.

- A. In the prosperity gospel, the believer is told to use God in a formula prospective to get what they desire. By this I mean, God has a standard program designed by which a person can follow; whereas the truth of biblical Christianity is just the opposite—God uses the believer.
- B. Prosperity theology sees the Holy Spirit as a

power to be put to use for whatever the believer wills. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is a Person who enables the believer to do God's will.

- C. Another problem with the prosperity teaching is that it fails to recognize that Jesus Himself is the ultimate treasure worth sacrificing everything for (Matthew 13:34), and instead sees Jesus as little more than a way of getting what we want right now.

The prosperity gospel movement closely resembles some of the destructive greed sects that infiltrated the early church.

The prosperity gospel movement closely resembles some of the destructive greed sects that infiltrated the early church. Paul and the other apostles were not accommodating to or conciliatory with the false teachers who propagated such heresy. They identified them as dangerous false teachers and urged Christians to avoid them. Paul warned Timothy about such men in 1Timothy 6:5, 9-11. These men of “corrupt mind” supposed godliness was a means of gain and their desire for riches was a trap that brought them “into ruin and destruction” (v. 9). The pursuit of wealth is a dangerous path for Christians and one which God warns about: “For

the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grieves” (v. 10). If riches were a reasonable goal for the godly, Jesus would have pursued it. But He did not, preferring instead to have no place to lay His head, Matthew 8:20, and teaching His disciples to do the same. It should also be remembered that the only disciple concerned with wealth was Judas (cf. John 12:5, 6).

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Paul said covetousness from the Greek word - (*pleonexias*) - by implication, it means, “fraudulency”, “extortion”; “greedy”, “desiring more”, “eager for gain”, is idolatry, (Ephesians 5:5). Thus he instructed the Ephesians to avoid anyone who brought a message of immorality or covetousness - (Ephesians 5:6-7). The prosperity teaching prohibits God from working on His own. Therefore, it replaces the sovereignty of God with human authority and will, so that preachers and teachers of this “gospel” must “release” God before He can work. “Faith”, according to the prosperity doctrine, is not submissive trust in God; faith is a formula by which humans manipulate the spiritual laws that govern the universe.

A favorite term in the prosperity gospel is “positive confession.” This refers to the teaching that words themselves have creative power. That is, a person’s confessions, especially the favors he/she demands and claims from God will come to pass as long as it is stated positively and without wavering. Thus, God's ability to bless us supposedly hangs on our faith. James 4:13-16 clearly contradicts this teaching: “Now listen,

you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

### **Biblical Response to the Prosperity Gospel:**

Instead of stressing the importance of wealth, the Bible warns against pursuing it. Believers, especially leaders in the church, 1Timothy 3:3, are to be free from the love of money (1Timothy 3:3), because, the love of money leads to all kinds of evil- (1Timothy 6:10). Jesus warned, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). In contrast to the prosperity teachings that emphasize gaining money and possessions in this life, Jesus commands His followers not to “store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19).

Rather than prioritizing economic prosperity especially, followers of Jesus should prioritize their relationship with God; it is He who gives prosperity. Jesus therefore says, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33, NIV). You would notice that “seek” is in the active voice, while “be given” is passive. Our responsibility is to “seek”; God’s responsibility to give us all that we need. “Be given” is best translated as “added unto you” as seen in the *King James* and *New American Standard Bible*. It is from the Greek word (*prostithēmi*) that means “to add to”, “to increase”. God does prosper His followers, but on His terms. His followers must live according to His righteousness, instead of coercing Him. Such a live requires that the disciples of Jesus deny themselves of all fleshly cravings and self-glorification and be ready to suffer for Him (Luke 14:25-35).

Whereas the Bible teaches that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2Timothy 3:12), the “Prosperity Gospel” teaches a continuously guaranteed divine favor, exempted from any kind of suffering, so that sufferings come only as the result of a lack of faith. Additionally, whereas the “Prosperity Gospel” focuses on Christians getting the things the world has to offer, the Gospel of Jesus Christ commands Christians not “love the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2:15), because a fondness for the things of the world causes Christians to become enemies of God (James 4:4). The message of the prosperity gospel simply cannot be any more opposite of what the Bible really teaches (Luke 14:25-35).

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In his book *“Your Best Life Now”*, Joel Osteen, (a prominent prosperity preacher) says the key to a more rewarding life, a better home, a stronger marriage, and a better job is found in a “simple yet profound process to change the way you think about your life and help you accomplish what is truly important.” How different that is from the biblical truth that this life now is nothing compared to the life to come. The message of the prosperity gospel is focused around the “treasures” or good things we want and can have now, as opposed to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:19-21.

Many prosperity preachers today who would like their congregation to believe that Jesus was rich while here on earth (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9)

God wants nothing more than to lavish His children with an abundance of material blessings. After all, a rich Jesus would certainly make it easier for them to persuade their flock that God wants them to be rich too. However, a materially rich Jesus Christ is utterly incompatible with biblical truth. Even a cursory examination of the Bible should dispel any notion of our Savior being wealthy in an earthly sense. During His public ministry, Christ and His disciples depended entirely on the hospitality of others as they ministered from town to town (Matthew 10:9-10). As a matter of fact, Jesus told a would-be follower “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head” (Luke 9:58).

It is unfortunate, then, that this false teaching about Christ’s wealth and its concomitant “gospel of greed” has gained a foothold in churches today. Paul warned of these teachers in his day, saying, “Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people” (Romans 16:17-18).

### **Conclusion:**

The warning of Jesus to His early disciples, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15) are for us today. The sentiment of Proverb 30:9 which declares “I may have too much and disown you and say ‘who is the LORD’” reverberates through the entirety of God’s Word. Thus, it would be a strange paradox indeed—and one that would certainly dilute the gospel message—if Jesus Christ were a member of the rich class of people who, as He declared, would find it so difficult “to enter the kingdom of Heaven” Matthew 19:23. Rev. James Partee Toga wrote in one of his articles that, “Prosperity preachers in the truest sense teach much of the

scriptures out of context for their own selfish gains”.

The “Prosperity Gospel” movement closely resembles some of the destructive greedy sects that infiltrated the early church. Paul and the

other apostles did not accommodate false teachers who propagated such heresy. They identified them as dangerous false teachers and urged Christians to avoid them. In the same way, followers of Jesus Christ must shun them.



**Rev. Charles D. Saywon,  
Pastor, Buchanan Wesleyan Church  
Liberia.**

Email: [charlessaywon@gmail.com](mailto:charlessaywon@gmail.com)

## HOW TO NURTURE AND MAINTAIN A COLLECTIVE VISION IN THE CHURCH

*‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’  
(Prov. 29:18a)*

Leadership is one of God’s gifts to humanity. *It is to be entrusted with the responsibility to manage human and material resources.* This was what God did; when he created the world He put into Adam’s care and control the Garden of Eden. As man was alone God further created Eve as helpmate and for procreation to replenish the earth. With Eve and her procreation role, a human element was factored into Adam’s responsibility to care and control the Garden of Eden. Throughout biblical history God has always ensured a concrete arrangement for the management of His human and material resources.

Leadership is the act of helping people achieve their aspirations in life and take them to their destiny.

*Leadership is also the act of helping people achieve their aspirations in life and take them to their destiny.* In this way, the basic responsibility of the leader is to first create a mental picture

(vision) of what the future looks like and work towards achieving the fortunes of that future. When God called Abraham He made two major promises, that He will make him into a great nation and give him the land of Canaan as everlasting inheritance (Gen. 12:1-3). This was God’s vision for Abraham; to make him into a great nation living in a land that flows with milk and honey. This vision was not achieved in a day. It took Israel hundreds of years to fully possess the land of Canaan. God was not alone in achieving this; he raised men and women such as Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Samuel, David, and Solomon to accomplish this vision. The vision was completely achieved in the coming of Jesus, the greatest leader and the fulfilment of that vision.

When Jesus came into the world he built a strong institution known as the *Church*. He laid his life for the Church and gave an assurance that the gate of hell shall never prevail against it (Mt. 16:17-19). Jesus raised men and women as leaders (disciples) of this great institution. He set an agenda for them, to go into the world and make disciples of all nations baptizing and teaching them all things (Mt.28:18-20). Only when this is done will the end come (Mt 24:14).

Today the Church continues in Jesus' agenda for humanity.

The general aim of leadership is to move people forward and achieve their aspirations. Moving people forward means seeing beyond those you are leading. This is what is referred to as vision. Vision is crucial for successful leadership and for the growth and development of any institution including the Church. Every leader must have a clear picture of where he wants to take his people. A vision must be nurtured and maintained. This is the purpose of this article, to help leaders nurture and develop a collective vision for the Church.

## **HOW TO NURTURE A VISION**

Nurturing a vision requires two main things, Casting and communicating the vision.

### **Casting the vision**

Casting a vision is not an unconscious effort. It is a deliberate action that requires a lot of considerations. Great leaders do mighty works because of their ability to develop a vision. A vision is cast by taking into consideration several factors.

The values of the institution: Every institution has distinctive values and a purpose. The church is an institution, hence it has a unique nature and a purpose. Bruce Milne summarizes the unique nature and purpose of the Church in this way, *"A true Church will be recognized by its unity in relationships, its holiness of life, its openness to all, its submission to the rule of the apostolic scripture, its preaching of Christ in word and sacrament, and its commitment to mission"* (Milne, 1996, p.220). The vision of any leader must reflect the values and purpose of the institution, in this case the Church. God's vision for the children of Israel in Egypt was to bring them out of the land of slavery to that of freedom. This vision reflected God's covenant relationship with Abraham and His promise (Gen. 12:7; Ex. 3:8).

The needs of the people: Leadership is to help people meet their aspirations for a better quality of life. The Church is a religious, benevolent, charitable and educational institution, hence every leader must make a conscious effort to meet the needs of the people. The leader can discover the needs of the people by their expression and feelings. God's vision for Israel was born out of the desire to satisfy a particular need, *freedom*. Israel was enslaved, they expressed their needs to God and God said, *"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt"* (Ex. 3:7). When God saw the need he set his vision, *"I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."* (Ex. 3:8)

Available Resources: Maintaining a vision requires both human and material resources. Israel was enslaved for four hundred years. During this period God raised a leader in the person of Moses to deliver Israel. He empowered him by giving him a staff to perform miracles in the eyes of Pharaoh and Israel (Ex. 3-4:1-17). God also gave Moses a spokesman in the person of Aaron. To cast a vision the leader has to consider the available resources. Remember casting a vision is not spontaneous; it has to be assessed against the available resources.

### **Communicating the Vision**

When a leader casts a vision he needs to communicate it to others. God communicated his vision to deliver Israel from slavery to Moses and Aaron; they in turn communicated it to Pharaoh and the entire congregation of Israel. God was careful and patient in communicating his vision to Moses. God explained the nature of his vision and how this will be achieved. Eventually Moses understood and carried the vision. Once this was done, Moses fearlessly confronted Pharaoh requesting the release of Israel (Ex.5:1-3); he encouraged Israel to



persevere in difficult moments in their journey (Ex. 14:13-14); he restrained God from taking drastic action against Israel when they rebelled against Him Nu. 14:13-24).

Once a vision has been cast it needs to be communicated to the team. The vision has to be communicated first to God through prayer because it His vision. The vision should be communicated to others because you need their effort. They need to discover the nature and purpose of the vision and assess it against the background of the values of the institution, the needs of the people and the available resources. When this is done the people will lay down their lives to pursue and maintain the vision. Jesus fully understood the vision of God for humanity, to give eternal life to those who will turn away from sin and accept His Son as Lord and Savior (Jn. 3:16-17) hence; he laid He life for His friends (Jn. 15:13). A well communicated vision will inspire people to lay their lives for the Church. This means people can do their utmost effort if they fully understand what the leader intends to do. A well-defined collective vision will perish if not well communicated, understood and accepted by the team.

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### **HOW TO MAINTAIN THE VISION**

To develop a vision is crucial for successful leadership but maintaining it is also very important.

To maintain a collective vision the leader will have to consider doing the following:

**Stay focused on the vision at all times.** A fact in pursuing a vision is that one will have to encounter challenges and oppositions. Moses had many challenges. Many people believe that Israel demonstrated the highest rebellious

attitude during Moses' leadership. Israel constantly rebelled against God and Moses. Each time they rebelled Moses will remind them of God's plan for them. Each time God is provoked to anger Moses will remind Him of his promise. Moses never lost sight of God's vision despite the prevailing circumstance. When Nehemiah had the vision to rebuild the fallen walls of Jerusalem he encountered huge opposition from Sanballat; Nehemiah remained steadfast in what he was doing and refused to be distracted (Neh. 4:1-5). If a leader is to maintain a vision he must stay focused on the vision. He must not allow himself to be distracted by anything but to stay focused at all time and in all things

**Demonstrate the right spirit.** To maintain a collective vision requires the right spirit such as humility and selflessness. Humility is lowliness, freedom from pride and upholding the worth of others. Selfless is seeking the interest of others at one's cost. Moses must have succeeded in his leadership because he possessed these two leadership qualities. He was both a humble and selfless leader. In fact Moses was considered the most humble person in his time (Nu. 12:3). When God promised to make him into a mightier nation, Moses selflessly turn down the offer (Nu. 14:13-19). If a leader wants to maintain a collective vision he must at all-time be devoid of pride, uphold the value of those he is working with and seek the interest of all rather than self. With the right spirit you will move fainted people.

**Motivate team members to move on.** Leadership is to move people. Moving people to their own destination is not an easy task. Opposition and challenges that can break the hearts of team members may occur; the team leader must be able to encourage his teammates to step up and face the challenges. When the ten spies and the congregation were fainting due to the bad report, Joshua and Caleb stood up and encouraged them not to see themselves as

grasshoppers but rather to rise up and advance for the Lord will surely give them the land.

Where the necessary resources to achieve the vision are scarce or not available the leader must make an effort to provide these resources. Moses was motivated to action when God offered the right tools such as the staff and the right partner, Aaron who became his spokesman. When the required resources are available for service, team members can exert their maximum effort.

**Enjoy the beauty on the road and count on the progress already made.** Pursuing a vision is full of challenges, but there are many good things you can enjoy along the way. Each step you take is a progress towards the goal. Enjoy the good things or the progress you have made in the process. Appreciate every little step you take today. An action today will help you to take another action tomorrow. Each time Israel rebelled against God, Moses always reminded them of the beautiful things they had begun enjoying on the way such as the miracles performed by God (Ex.14:21-22) and the

provision of food and water (Ex. 15:22-27; 16:1-5). Moses also reminded them to appreciate the steady progress they were making such as crossing the Red Sea, going through the desert on to the point they have arrived. Count the blessings and do not dwell on the inevitable challenges you will face on the way.

*A vision is the road map to your leadership journey. When it is diligently nurtured and maintained it will make you a mighty leader. Consider how you have to nurture and maintain your vision. The two cannot be separated. This should be the leader's deliberate action, to nurture and maintain a collective vision for the Church. When this is done, it will inspire every member to action and the vision achieved in due time. Remember "where there is no vision the people perish" (Prov. 29:18a)*

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**Rev. Dr. Usman J. Fornah,  
National Superintendent,  
Wesleyan Church – Sierra Leone**

**Email: [usmanfornah@yahoo.com](mailto:usmanfornah@yahoo.com)**

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