

## **THE INVITING DIVERSITY OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY**

Remarks offered by the Revd. Dr. Titus Presler on the International Panel at the Third Millennium Christianity Conference of Going Forward Together III  
Center for Reconciliation and Mission, St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia  
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I thank the organizers for the opportunity to reflect on realities of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World in the setting of this conference, which brings together interests in the Emerging Church Movement in the West with an eagerness to hear about Christian developments in other parts of the world at this time of tension in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

I'd like to offer a vignette from Anglican and ecumenical life in another part of the world that gives you a flavor of particular Christian expressions on the ground, and then reflect on it.

Perhaps nowhere in the world other than Zimbabwe do so many Christian groups spend so much time staying up all night, from dusk until dawn, in vigils devoted to preaching, singing, praying and casting out demons. Both mission-founded churches and African-initiated churches engage in the practice, and Anglicans are as much into it as anyone else. As a missionary priest, I found that such vigils were a major vehicle through which Christians recovered community after the devastating liberation war that brought majority rule to Zimbabwe in 1980 and during which church life was often suppressed.

Why stay up all night? Well, in Shona Spirit Religion, night is the time for encountering and receiving the counsel of the ancestral spirits that are venerated under the monotheistically conceived High God Mwari. Through meeting the ancestors, the family or clan group reaffirms its identity through the experience of spirit possession, which includes lots of singing and dancing amid sniffing snuff and drinking ritual beer. That expectation of

spiritual encounter is central to the all-night vigils in the churches, but now it is the trinitarian God who is met. With the background of spirit possession, the Holy Spirit is especially magnetic and is often experienced with gifts of tongues and prophecy. Conversely, Christians will often cast out demons they believe are masquerading as ancestral spirits. Thus, although early missionaries often discouraged all-night ritual, the shared nocturnal time has prompted Christians to engage in deep reflection about traditional rites and often to confront the ancestral spirits, not to fall back into a worshipful stance toward them.

And what of the recovery of ancient Christian practice, a phenomenon which this conference has highlighted in the Emerging Church Movement? As you can imagine, Anglicans are very receptive to the Great Vigil of Easter, but now they take it in an all-night direction. We would gather for a community meal Saturday evening, followed by the Lighting of the New Fire. Each of the Nine Lessons would be followed by a major sermon by a different catechist, the preachings interspersed with songs and prayers. We broke at midnight for a Passion and Easter Play put on by some of the youth, who themselves might constitute half the congregation, and the preaching would resume. Exorcism might follow at the traditionally sensitive spiritual time around 3 a.m. Then there would be Baptism at 4:30 or 5, and the First Eucharist of Easter at dawn, after which people would gather for tea and buns under the eucalyptus trees and board buses to return home – sleepy but exulting!

Later as a researcher I experienced one African-initiated church, the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange, in which members routinely walk on fire during their night vigils. I studied a church founded by a woman and consisting mostly of women, the Pentecostal Apostolic Church of God, that casts out a type of male avenging spirit believed to afflict women in particular. I spent time with several churches that undertake distant night-time

pilgrimages to pray in desolate places atop high ridges and mountains.

From this vignette, I make several observations about the Third Millennium Christianity that is the focus of this conference:

First, we might speak of Christianities rather than Christianity in order to stress just how different Christian life is in other parts of the world, so different that not only outside observers but even insiders in those places sometimes question whether these forms are actually Christian. In other words, as western Christians we need to take in the full dimensions of difference in such Christian expressions. From the triple standpoint of faith discernment, theological analysis, and anthropological research, I believe the vast majority of people who call themselves Christian are in fact Christian. The question as I see it is not whether they are Christian but how we can forge community with them, whether in the Anglican Communion or in the ecumenical community.

Second, all Christianities are contextually formed by local cultures, social histories, and eco-political conditions. The Emerging Church Movement in the West is just as locally contextual as the fire-walking Christians of Zimbabwe. The trick is to discern what can be shared cross-culturally and what is so unique that we can only marvel and wonder. As the English missiologist Max Warren said in the 1950s, "It takes the whole world to know the whole gospel." Our own Christianity – our sense of who Jesus is, our vision for Christian community and mission – will be narrow, limited and impoverished if we are confined only to our own cultural context and uninformed by the wider Christian world.

Third, the premises and the historical framework of local Christianities can differ widely. While secularism may be the chief threat in parts of Europe, demons, poverty and AIDS are the chief threats for many churches in Africa. The pre-modern,

modern and post-modern framework that means something to us in our history in the West may mean little to people who have leaped from drums to cell phones, without landlines in between, but, more important, have never had an Enlightenment dualism to overcome. They may have modern conveniences, but they may never have the Enlightenment mentality so characteristic of modernity, so the very terms pre-modern and post-modern actually impose our history onto their distinctive histories. Thus that three-fold paradigm can be intellectually imperial if it is generalized onto world Christianity in the Third Millennium. Similarly, in researching the Church of North India for the Global Anglicanism Project, I found Christians able easily to embrace both justice work and neighborhood evangelism, both inter-religious dialogue and church-planting: no binding dualisms there, either in the past or now! It's not that Christianity in the Two-Thirds World is pre-modern or post-modern. Rather, it is simply non-Western, quite beyond the western categories.

Fourth, my definition of Christian mission is that it is ministry in the dimension of difference. When we minister beyond the boundaries of who we are in our distinctive communities, when we reach beyond ourselves to encounter the other who is radically different, there we are on mission. If difference is the very terrain of mission, we should not be surprised when Christian expressions differ strongly as a result of mission and in the midst of shared mission. Perhaps there is a core that defines the gospel of Jesus Christ, but we'll know what that core is only in the glory of Christ's consummated kingdom. Meanwhile, as we meet Christian difference – whether in the vast array of Christianities or in the turmoil of the Anglican Communion – we have the opportunity to grow in our own understandings of what the gospel is, and the opportunity to marvel and meet God there!

*The International Panel was moderated by the Revd. Dr. William Sachs, Director, Center for Reconciliation and Mission, St.*

*Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia. Other members of the International Panel were: the Rt. Revd. David Beetge, Diocese of the Highveldt, Anglican Church of Southern Africa; the Revd. Dr. Sathianathan Clarke, Professor of Theology, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.; the Rt. Revd. Mano Rumalshah, Bishop of Peshawar, Church of Pakistan; Dr. Jenny Te Paa, Dean, St. John's Theological College, Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand.*

*Presler's book-length treatment of the night vigils is Transfigured Night: Mission and Culture in Zimbabwe's Vigil Movement (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1999). The pilot project report of the Global Anglicanism Project, The Vitality and Promise of Being Anglican, was edited by Sachs and co-authored by Clarke, Te Paa and Presler, along with Donald Miller and Maurice Seaton; it is available from the Episcopal Church Foundation.*

*For further details of the conference, see [www.goingforwardtogether.org](http://www.goingforwardtogether.org).*