The Impact of African Students on an African-American Seminary*

Introduction

Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) began in 1958, the result of merging four separate theological seminaries to form at that time the most creative venture in American theological education. These seminaries were: Gammon Theological Seminary (United Methodist), Morehouse School of Religion (Baptist), Phillips School of Theology (Christian Methodist Episcopal), and Turner Theological Seminary (African Methodist Episcopal). In 1970, Johnson C. Smith Seminary (Presbyterian USA) moved from Charlotte, North Carolina, where it had existed since 1867, to become the fifth denominational constituent seminary of ITC. A year later, 1971, the Church of God in Christ established its first theological School (Charles Harrison Mason Seminary), becoming the sixth seminary of ITC. The Episcopal Church organized the Absalom Jones Episcopal Institute and positioned it at the Institution during the seventies.

International Contributions

Johnson C. Smith Seminary was founded in 1867. It, like Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, formerly

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Ashmun Institute, had as part of its original purpose to prepare recently freed slaves for missionary service in Africa. A number of its students came from West Africa and latterly from East Africa. For over a hundred years leadership for many African churches and for the emerging political ambitions of these countries was shaped and realized by the activity and involvement of some of our former students. It is conservatively estimated that in the thirty-seven years of ITC's existence almost two hundred students from seventeen African countries have studied here. Additionally, they have come from Europe, Asia, Central and South America, the Caribbean and the Middle East. We at ITC, by the presence of our brothers and sisters from Africa and elsewhere, have gained as much as we have given, learned as much as we have taught.

All too often mission—pastoral, educational, agricultural or developmental—is a one-way street. American Christians have been socialized to believe that resources in the West far outweigh those of our international relationships. It is true that America's resources of wealth are massive by comparison; and, the sharing of it can impact the needs of developing countries around the world.

Students who have studied at ITC and its individual seminaries contribute much to American Christian development and to the ethos of this campus. Some of these contributions are:

- A first-hand exposure to the religious, cultural, social and political realities in Africa and elsewhere.
- The dispelling of deeply ingrained myths and half-truths about cultures outside the United States.

- The broadening of our curriculum offerings to include a global context for ministry and the redefinition of our Mission statement to account for an informed Afro-centric thrust.
- A spirituality that is holistlc, making no significant allowances for the sacred and the secular.
- The sharing of a collective consciousness that counters our American penchant for individualism, that is, "me" and "my" as opposed to "we" and "our."
- The provision of helpful links with individual leaders throughout the world and with denominational officials, creating international bridges of understanding and trust.

As indicated previously, the contribution of the ITC context on the expansion of the church and its leadership in many developing countries is dramatic. Over the past quarter-century, ITC and its member seminaries have covenanted with churches around the world to provide scholarship assistance for persons needing additional educational opportunities. This covenant has yielded phenomenal results. For example, the following positions are filled by ITC graduates:

Kenya

- The current and previous General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa
- Professor at Kenyatta College
- Former principal of Saint Paul's Theological College
- Lecturer at the Pastoral Training Institute
- Bishop, Methodist Church, Meru District

Sudan

- Director of Development of the Sudan Council of Churches
- Principal, Nile Theological College
- Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Sudan
- Director of Evangelism, Presbyterian Church of Sudan

Ghana

- District Pastor of Agona Swedru Presbyterian Church of Ghana

Cameroon

- Presbyterian Secretary in Fako North Malawi
- College Professor
- General Secretary, Synod of Livingstonia

Zaire

- New Testament Professor at the Kimbanquist Seminary in Kinshasa

Zambia

- General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia

Costa Rica

- Anglican Bishop South Africa
- Head, Saint John Apostolic Church
- Denominational Executive, Methodist Church of Africa

Nigeria

- Anglican Suffragen Bishop

In addition, ITC graduates are serving in pastorates of every description in numerous settings.

African-American Missionaries

It has been my good fortune to travel to Africa on many occasions. One question is uniformly asked: "Are not there any African–American missionaries?" This question has been a source of embarrassment for twenty-five years. In too many instances, except for West Africa, the place where Presbyterians have traditionally sent African-American missionaries, few if any have ever been sent, either as missionaries or as part of traveling delegations. The discomfort is all the more troublesome when one discusses Afro-centrism in the African-American Community. Can this effort be anything more than hollow rhetoric without the movement of African Americans to the motherland as missionaries and fraternal workers? Empowered by this reality, ITC has committed itself to being able to answer such a question from our brothers and sisters in Africa with a heartfelt "Yes."

Impetus for a positive Presbyterian response began in the late 1940s when Dr. Darius Leander Swann became a missionary to China and India, the first African American sent to a country other than those in Africa. He was followed by Bryant George who went to Pakistan. Mrs. Costen and I came close to responding positively to the call of missionary service. The lifelong dream of Dr. Arthur H. George, former Dean, JCSS, Charlotte, NC, was to serve as a missionary. Unfortunately, his ambition was thwarted by the refusal of the Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church (USA), due to its moratorium on

African-American candidates. However, something of his dream was realized through his association with other missionaries in the field.

Upon becoming Dean of Johnson C. Smith Seminary at ITC in 1969, I accepted the challenge of fostering missionary awareness and, upon becoming President of ITC, broadened this ambition considerably. Working through the Leadership Development Office of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, agreements were made with the Presbyterian Churches of East Africa and the Sudan to provide one scholarship each year for their prospective leaders. Over twenty top-flight persons have studied here from Kenya and Sudan in the past twenty years. Students from other countries were also aided in their preparation for leadership.

The constant influx of students from Africa and elsewhere has been mutually beneficial. For example, It was Ezekiel Kutjok, a tall, imposing, dynamic leader from southern Sudan, who challenged Marsha Snulligan Haney to consider missionary service in the Sudan. Marsha accepted this challenge, first in Sudan and later in Cameroon. Today, she is Dr. Marsha Snulligan Haney, assistant professor of Missiology and Religions of the World at ITC. She replaced Dr. Swann, the first African-American Presbyterian missionary to serve in China and India, who had retired from ITC a year earlier. Her presence, along with the influences of Dr. Swann and Dr. Ndugu T'Ofori-Atta, himself a former missionary in Zaire, make quite an impact on our students and on the general interdenominational ethos of our campus.

One cannot truly value the presence of our brothers

and sisters until one has participated in the informal dormitory settings or engage with them in chapel experiences where intentional African cultural exposure is the order of the day. Then to have an African family-night dinner with the entire community, where groundnut soup and *fufu* from West Africa and *ireo* or *ugali* from Kenya, along with other dishes, are served, is a culinary experience. Academically, we are finding it equally advantageous to guide our international students in doing classroom assignments and research documentation on subjects that will advance their knowledge for effectual ministry in their home contexts.

It is an incontrovertible fact that more African-American students enrolled at ITC through Johnson C. Smith Seminary have entered missionary service or have had international exposure than at any other seminary. Some of the countries included in this listing are: Ghana, Taiwan, Kenya, Liberia, Lesotho, Zaire, Cameroon, Sudan, Malawi, China, India, Pakistan, and Madagascar. Further, one former student serves as Deputy General Secretary of the All-African Conference of Churches in Nairobi.

The Board of Trustees of ITC spent considerable time in 1984 and again in 1990 revising our Mission statement to ensure that the missionary thrust of the Institution was consistent with the newly-revised curriculum. Growing out of this thrust were several pivotal grants from the Luce Foundation. These grants enabled ITC to make available to its faculty and students a number of visiting scholars from churches around the world, leaders and interpreters of other religions, including the Christian Dalits of India, short–

and long-term travel for our students and faculty to world settings, and the acquisition of an impressive audio-visual collection. Since the inception of this program, well over a hundred of our students have traveled to China, India, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, Hungary, Israel, Brazil, Ghana and the Gambia for credit and non-credit field experiences.

Mission Resource Training Center

Probably the most significant result of our mission-mindedness was landing the United Methodist Mission Resource Center (UMRC). Working on the discontinuation of the Stony Point Training Center, the United Methodist Church requested proposals from institutions throughout the country to house its orientation and training center. Working independently, yet compatibly, proposals were sent from Candler School of Theology at Emory University and from ITC, which includes the United Methodist Gammon Seminary. Both schools were selected to house the UMRC, and for the past four years we have worked closely together to create a cohesive environment for missionaries in training. For two long-term periods of ten weeks and several shorter terms, persons preparing for service around the world and in this country receive their training. They are enrolled in regularly taught courses at ITC and at Candler. They engage our students in dialogue about their motivation for service in the church throughout the world as facilitators of mission. This exposure has deepened and crystalized

some of the more noble ideas about missionary service and disabused the students of some of their romantic and naive notions.

Conclusion

Interdenominational Theological Center has grown to 450 students in its campus-based degree programs and over 600 in its certificate programs in fifty-two extension sites around the country. It is our hope that the influences of our regular exchange with students from Africa and other places, as well as the churches from which they come, will continue to infuse the life of this Institution, making it increasingly committed to the preparation of men and women as partners in the world of mission here and "wherever the sun."