

INTRODUCTION

The Story of Pan-African Christianity and PACCC I

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The story of Pan-Africanism, of Pan-African Christianity, and the First Pan-African Christian Church Conference (PACCC I) begins with the antecedent reality of African humanity and the plethora of traditional religious inheritances. Millions of Christian and non-Christian people who are the direct descendants of African ancestors populate not only the continent of Africa, but most of the continents of the world. There are varying concentrations in South, Central, and North America and the Caribbean basin, in Asia, Europe, and other regions of the world.

Whatever the religious inheritance, there are many ways that Africa has called her children everywhere to reaffirm their loyalty to authentic peoplehood. The ancestors of Traditional Africa, that is to say — Africa before Judaism, Christianity, Islam or other faith traditions — were a religious people from time immemorial. Is it possible that the spirits of the ancestors continue to summon African children in every place to reaffirm African humanity in faith, and to reaffirm their faith in humanity?

Wherever African descendants have acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord, there emerged *an incorporation of African Christianity*. This call to peoplehood in Christ has challenged all descendants of Africa to recognize and affirm an African unity in Christ, the one Lord of all. The First Pan-African Christian Church Conference (PACCC I) which convened in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A., from July 17 to 23, 1988, was a part of an international *koinonia* whose time had come. This unique Pan-African Christian experience brought us together to share the story of the Faith.

The Purpose, Criteria and Objectives

PACCC I had a two-fold purpose: (1) to witness to an encounter with the Christian faith through the African religious experience; and (2) to provide a context wherein African Christianity, enhanced by an ecumenical fellowship, could express its commitment to the promotion of unity and liberation, mission and holism.

Three criteria or objectives shaped the operational process: first, to hear about the primary religious resources of African people in various events, times, and places; secondly, to listen to presentations of the data of experience, knowledge, and traditions given by distinguished scholars and church executives; thirdly, to understand the original sources of the nurture that came to Christianity from African Traditional Religions and to learn how those sources shaped and modified Christian belief and practice throughout the African diaspora.

The following objectives were adopted by the Local Planning Committee in Atlanta and guided the administration and direction of the Conference.

- To share the uniqueness of the Christian story in the African experience with others of diverse Black Christian Church traditions.
- To explore the essential content of African traditional religious beliefs and practices and how they have been modified by various Christian cultural and historical contexts around the world.
- To convene scholars, theologians, church leaders, and specialists to share perspectives of their Christian experience through papers, reports, addresses, and panel discussions.
- To initiate a process of networking that will promote ecumenical dialogue and cooperation for establishing structures

and developing strategies aimed at increasing and strengthening Black participation in the worldwide Christian community.

- To mount new initiatives for undergirding the humanities and expanding existing efforts in the continuing struggle against all forms of oppression.

The Organizing and Planning Process

The organizing of the Conference was primarily the work of the Interdenominational Theological Center's research-advocacy-action project: *The Religious Heritage of the African World*, and Area III of the I.T.C. curriculum — Persons, Society and Culture.

Many people were inspired to make a commitment to work in tireless, steady effort from the summer of 1986 to the summer of 1988 to plan this conference. Three persons deserve special recognition for their exemplary labor of love: Roseanna Thomas-Brannon of *The Religious Heritage of the African World*, who served as Administrative Coordinator of the Conference; Dr. Darius Lee Swan of the I.T.C. faculty; and Dr. Marian Grier, former missionary and volunteer on loan from the Board of Global Ministry of the United Methodist Church. The final prayer-request of Nanasewah (Farrel Harmon Thomas), as a response to the African and ultimate home-calling, became an inspiration during the rites of passage into the living-dead community, having whispered, "Take me home," on July 18, 1986.

The opportunity for the conference and the challenge were given by the President of the I.T.C., Dr. James H. Costen, who said, "Let us represent God's New Vanguard." Also Dr. David T. Shannon, Vice-President for Academic Services, helped us to broaden the base of the Conference by emphasizing the need to invite more persons from the diaspora, particularly from the Caribbean and other American regions. Various members of the faculty, staff and student body of the I.T.C. and some community and church people joined the local, national and international planning

process. Among those who served in this way were Drs. Charles Copher, Gayraud Wilmore, Rita Dixon and Kofi A. Opoku.

The Symbols and Spirit

The official symbol of the conference combined, on Akan design from West Africa, (Gye Nyame — “God above all”) in the background, with the ankh-shaped cross (the “Key of Life”) which is an Egyptian or kemitic symbol for life. This combination illustrated the vertical reach of the incarnate Christ’s mission to call us into unity for spiritual transformation. The horizontal outstretched arms portrayed the ecumenical outreach which gathered scattered and battered African children from the “four corners” of the earth.

From the spirit of Swahili in East Africa we adopted the conference motto — “Harambee, Uhuru na Kazi.” *Harambee* — bonding us to togetherness; *Uhuru* — bonding us to freedom; and *Kazi* — bonding us to struggle. Through working and building with a vision of the “abundant life” as the “Key of Life” in every place and for all people, our spirits covenanted to be sensitive and responsive to the poor and hungry, the homeless and oppressed children of God. In symbol and spirit, therefore, the story of PACCC I is a story of the intentional gathering of Africans from around the world, most of them representing Christian churches, to tell, hear and share the story of Christ and the stories of our common history and humanity. Thus, was the conference united on the basis of heritage, with hope, through struggle.

The colors red, black and green were reminders of this heritage, hope, and struggle. Red is the symbol of courage and vicarious love — the Great Libation of God through Jesus Christ, and the bloody pathways of our ancestors across lands and seas. Black symbolizes African ethnic identity — our African peoplehood, as well as the commonality of our struggle for all oppressed humanity. Green is the symbol of new life springing from

our dignified-dust and humanized-geography. It stands for the unity of land and life, fertility to produce children unborn, and faith in the immortality of ancestors who are now in the living-dead community — our ever-extending and boundless family of God.

The Diversity of Participants

Two-hundred and seventy persons, including presenters, registered for PACCC I. Scholars, church leaders, and specialists of various religious and academic backgrounds came together in this historic meeting. They represented a cross-section of Christian traditions which issued from and were shaped by the African experience. They told their own stories from several regions of Africa, North America, the islands of the Caribbean, the Pacific, Asia, and Europe. Presentations and lectures were made in plenary sessions. There were dialogues, rituals, and worship. Much of the work of the conference was done in daily workshops and small group sessions.

Our collective efforts were designed to maximize the possibility and meaning of speaking out of the African Christian experience in various cultural contexts. This conference intended to be yet another opening to a larger arena for ongoing conversations and actions among us. We wanted to discover the meaning of the Pan-African experience in general and the Christian experience in particular, for the purpose of laying the groundwork for a truly ecumenical, Pan-African Christian initiative.

The rich diversity of the participants afforded new linkages of knowledge and experience. Information about African Traditional Religions, the Hebrew Israelites, Islam, and Christianity was shared in many meetings and briefing sessions. The patterns by which Christianity made its way among African peoples dominated in these discussions and were contributed by representatives of the Orthodox traditions, the Connectional and/or Independent traditions, and the Indigenous or Instituted traditions. Other

profiles of Christianity were illustrated from denominations and movements participated in by descendants of Mother Africa in the widely dispersed African diaspora.

There were also connections made at this conference between the theological and academic arenas and the local church and community arenas. We listened with a new and deeper understanding to witnesses from varied communities of the People of God who told their own stories out of the drama of salvation going on in their own countries. We heard also of persistent problems. The brokenness of humanity under the scourge of famine, malnutrition, racism, apartheid, sexism, and disease — a virtual litany of foreign and domestic exploitation and oppression. Together we were able, nevertheless, to see the Church emerging from the crucible of an African Christian experience and taking upon herself the mission and mandate of transformation and liberation.

An Overview of the Content of This Volume

Because of the large volume of the material coming out of PACCC I, we were unable, in this issue of the JITC, to reproduce all of the papers and other presentations that were made at the conference. Accordingly, what follows below is an overview designed to give the reader some understanding of our rationale for the organization of the conference and a brief introduction to the articles that are contained in this issue of the Journal.

Part I, Section I on African Traditional Religion, the Bible, and Christian Theology, begins with a paper by Professor Kofi Asare Opuku, of the University of Ghana, in which he describes the nature and reality of the African religious inheritance. Since the Bible has deep roots in Africa, Professor Opoku's presentation is followed by the paper by Dr. Charles B. Copher, widely acknowledged as the dean of African American Biblical scholars and Professor Emeritus of the Old Testament at the I.T.C.

Dr. Copher's presentation, "The Bible and the African Experience," a comprehensive documentation of the place of Africa in the Old and New Testaments, is followed by a positive response to his lecture by Dr. Charles Finch, the noted African American Egyptologist, who contributes little known and fascinating linguistic analyses of the African, particularly Egyptian, influences that some scholars have found in the text of the Old Testament.

This section concludes with two papers by internationally renowned African scholars. Dr. John S. Mbiti's essay, "God, Sin and Salvation in African Religion" sharpens the perspectives of African Traditional Religion. Dr. Temba J. Mafico, a Zimbabwean, Associate Professor of Old Testament at the I.T.C., follows with a discussion of how the African heritage lends itself to the doing of theology on the continent. Mafico is particularly interested in Christian theology in the light of the African emphasis upon the special role of ancestral spirits in the community of the living.

Section II is entitled African Orthodox Christianity. There have been three major branches of the Christian Church which emerged from Africa and are experiencing steady growth in the present. The first comprises the African Orthodox churches; the second, the African Connectional-Independent Christian churches; and the third, the African Independent and Instituted churches — sometimes referred to as the "Spiritual" churches.

African Christian Orthodoxy is represented by the essay of Archbishop Yesehaq of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, entitled "The Ethiopian Church and Its Living Heritage." Archbishop Yesehaq contends that the only Christian church in Africa that can trace its genealogical lineage from Adam is the Ethiopian Church. His contribution is followed by Dr. Maurice Assad's comprehensive study of the African Coptic Church. Assad shows how the spread of Christianity in Egypt is unquestionably related to the influence of the Egyptian cosmology upon Hebrew thought as it was assimilated by the ancient Copts and provided a basis for the Chris-

tian faith. His presentation was complemented by the poetic and sensitive witness to the power of Orthodoxy in Africa by Bishop Antonius Markos, which we unfortunately were unable to reproduce in this issue of the JITC.

Section III presents papers from the Independent-Instituted church traditions. The first is by Dr. Owanga Welo, from Francophone Central Africa, on the origin and influence of the church of the prophet Simon Kimbangu. Owango Welo describes the vitality and perserverance of Kimbanguism, an authentically African Christian movement, growing out of popular resistance to European Christianity and ruthless persecution by both the mission churches and the colonial powers.

One of the most interesting "separatist" or "spiritual" churches in West Africa grew out of the movement originated by Moses Orimolade Tunolase who sought to Africanize and spiritualize the Christian faith in the indigenous culture. The church it produced is called the Cherubim and Seraphim Church and is well known today in several countries of West Africa. In his essay, Dr. James A. Omoyajow of Nigeria describes its evolution in the context of a strong tradition of healing by revelation and inspiration. The last essay in this section comes from one of the Anglophone regions of Southern Africa. It was written by Rev. O. O. Ditsheko and deals with the Independent churches of Botswana.

Section IV introduces African church associations, unions, and councils of churches. Here we see the variety of ecclesial forms and examples of grassroots and ecumenism on the continent today. Dr. N. Ndirangu-Kihara presents a study of "Northeast African Christianity: A Socio-Historical Analysis of Connectional Independency and Missiology." Two case studies of these examples of the ecumenical movement in Africa follow: Dr. J. Adejumo Adegbite's essay on the formation of the Christian Council of Nigeria, and the more recent Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which brought together Protestants, Roman Catholics, and some Apostolic or Spiritual churches; and a brief article by Rev. Jose Chipenda, an Angolan formerly with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, who is present-

ly the executive secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya.

The fifth and final section of Part I discusses African Christian Encounters on several levels throughout the continent. Dr. Sipo Mzimela, presently teaching in Atlanta, made a presentation to the conference that is not contained in this collection. We are including, however, a short paper on South Africa by Mrs. Tandi Gcabashe, the daughter of Chief Albert Luthuli, who represented the American Friends Service Committee in Atlanta.

The essay by Dr. Lamin Sanneh was one of the major presentations of the conference—a brilliant exposition of the faith-encounter between Christianity and Islam represented by the differences between Pentecost and the Hijrah. Part I closes with an inspired homiletical piece by Professor Ogbu U. Kalu entitled “Liberty to the Captives: Devotional Cameos of Liberation” in which he blends spirit, scholarship and struggle in Africa and the African diaspora.

The African Diaspora

Part II turns our attention to the African Diasporic Christian Inheritance and contains five sections focusing on developments in South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and North America. The first is a provocative proposal by Dr. Lelia Gonzalez of Brazil, a nation which experienced one of the most profound impacts of African religion and culture. Dr. Gonzalez’s essay, “A Socio-Historical Study of South American Christianity,” introduces the term “Amefricanity” as a way of conceptualizing and advocating the meaning and struggle of African culture throughout the diaspora in the Americas. Her essay is followed by a discussion of the strong African retentions to be found in the religious beliefs and social practices of Surinam, by Dr. Leo Dielingen, a scholar-pastor who leads a one thousand-member congregation of mainly Surinamese people related

to both the Lutheran and Moravian traditions in Lage Web, The Netherlands.

Representing Central America, Rev. Manuel Morales presents a discussion of African inheritances in the littoral areas of Nicaragua. His answer to the question of whether or not such an inheritance exists today is decidedly affirmative.

In Section II of Part II, we shift to the Caribbean with two essays—one by Dr. George Mulrain, on Jamaica, and the second by F. Rene Castellanos on Cuba. Dr. Mulrain, a Jamaican sociologist of religion who teaches both at the College of the West Indies in Kingston and in England, outlines the various denominational histories in the early encounters of Africans in the Caribbean with missionary Christianity, noting especially the vigor and growth of revivalistic movements. Dr. Castellanos, writing on “African-Hispanic-Cuban Christianity,” describes the role of the Catholic Church in helping to shape the transplanted African Traditional Religions into such syncretistic movements as Cuban Santeria. At the conference other presentations on Caribbean Christianity were made by Rev. Sherwin Alleyne of the Moravian Church in the U.S. Virgin Islands, on Danish influences in the Caribbean, and Dr. Charles Romain of Port-au-Prince on the emergence of Pentecostalism upon the base of the African-Roman Catholic inheritance in Haiti, but neither could be included in this collection.

In Section III, on diasporic Christianity in North America, the statements published here were presented in a panel discussion at the conference. The first is by Dr. Gayraud Wilmore discussing the ebb and flow of Pan-African sentiment among African American Christians in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is followed by a presentation by Dr. James H. Cone, Briggs Distinguished Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, outlining the two foci around which Black Theology developed in the U.S.—Malcolm X’s critique of white Christianity as reflected in the Black Power and Black Consciousness movements,

and the biblical emphasis on justice and liberation as reflected in the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The African American panel concluded with a presentation on "Womanist Theology in North America," in which Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the I.T.C., shows how Black women, particularly in the United States, responded to both white feminist theology and Black liberation theology. She makes the point that Black women were obliged to do their theology out of the tri-dimensional experience of racism, sexism and classism.

This section concludes with the presentation made at a plenary session during the conference by Dr. Vincent Harding of Iliff Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado. Dr. Harding, who worked closely with Dr. King during the civil rights movement, anticipates the significance of King's life and ministry for all of us, Black and white, male and female, in the 21st century.

The final sessions of the conference and the concluding section of this issue of the *Journal of the I.T.C.* focuses on models of solidarity with all oppressed people, particularly those in Africa and the diaspora, by Christians in Asia and the Pacific Islands. It is clear that a Pacific Theology is emerging that will accent unity in aspiration and struggle of all people of color who have suffered from prejudice and discrimination at the hands of Euro-American brothers and sisters.

The first essay in this final section, "Pacific Christianity and People Solidarity," is by Dr. John Havea, the sole representative at the conference from Tonga, where he said the sense of solidarity is evident. His presentation at the conference was received with warm welcome and appreciation by most of us who knew so little about the Pan-African connection in the Pacific. The second essay is by Dr. S. Wismoady Wahono, from Indonesia. It traces the role of their churches from the colonial era to self-identification and independence, particularly after the Bandung Conference in 1955. Dr. Wahono discusses the ideology of *Pancasila*, combining state and church interests in creative, critical, yet realistic and constructive strategies for practical religion and politics in a multi-religious society. His

essay also deals with PERESTIA, the coming together of theological schools in Indonesia for ecumenical education and progressive social development.

Some Concluding Observations

The First Pan-African Christian Church Conference was a unique experience. Never before, as far as we know, had a large gathering of delegated representatives of Christian churches in Africa and the diaspora assembled in the United States for the explicit purpose of exploring the history, contemporary meaning, and social mission of Christianity from a Pan-African perspective — involving such a rich diversity of African and African-American religious scholars and church leaders. This was, without a doubt, a conference of historic significance for the American churches and the ecumenical movement as a whole.

The worship life of PACCC I was particularly noteworthy. From the opening prayer by Archbishop Marino of the Catholic archdiocese of Atlanta on July 17, to the closing message of President James H. Costen of the Interdenominational Theological Center, on July 23, the presence of the Holy Spirit was invoked in daily ecumenical services coordinated by Dr. Melva Costen, Helmar Nielsen Professor of Music and Worship at the I.T.C. There were many workshops, panel discussions, study visits to cultural centers, private consultations and social gatherings which added another dimension that complemented the formal lectures and reading of papers.

The conference was visited by Oba Seijeman Adejunmi, king of the Oyotunji Village near Sheldon, South Carolina, who discussed African Traditional Religion and its revitalization among many African Americans in the United States. Bishop Matthew Ajouga, president of the Association of African Independent Churches from Nairobi, made a special presentation on his work, as did Bishop Bokeleale, president of one of the most important united churches in Africa, the Church of Christ of Zaire, and

Rev. Ndala Za Fwa Luntandila, General Secretary of the Kimbanguist Church, also headquartered in Kinshasa, Zaire.

There was a lively panel discussion on apartheid and the situation in South Africa by Dr. Sipio Mzemila, an Episcopal priest residing in Atlanta. The rich scholarly and community activist resources of Atlanta made possible special sessions on Holistic Health and Illness Care by Dr. James Carter, at that time on the faculty of the Morehouse School of Medicine; Male and Female Sexual Identity and Struggle by Dr. L. Patricia Johnson, and on the Poverty Cycle by Ms. Lee Fuse Wood. Not included in this issue of the JITC, but presented at the conference were also analyses and programmatic recommendations on the Black Church in the United States by Dr. William H. Borders, Dr. Juel Pate Borders, and Dr. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The conference adjourned on July 23 with an inspiring message by the President of the I.T.C., Dr. James H. Costen, and a reading of the Conference Message, prepared by Dr. Darius Lee Swann, Professor of Missiology and World Religions at the I.T.C. The Proceedings and the Message of the First Pan-African Christian Church Conference will be published in another place in the near future.

It would be remiss to conclude this Introduction and conference observations without expressing my personal thanks to the many supporting institutions and organizations, as well as the individual colleagues, students, church members and friends who made this historic meeting an achievement in ecumenical and Pan-African history that exceeded our highest hopes. May God be pleased to bless our humble offering to the whole Church of Christ in years to come. **Harambee, Uhuru na Kazi!**

The author, Dr. Ndugu GBT'Afori-Atta, Professor in the area of Persons, Society and Culture and Director of The Religious Heritage of the African World at the I.T.C., was Project Director of the First Pan-African Christian Church Conference. We acknowledge the kind assistance of Dr. T'Ofori-Atta and his staff in the preparation of this issue of the JITC.

The Editor