



Listening and Learning in Africa¹

LOIS M. SNOOK

St. Paul, Minnesota

“TAKE THIS MESSAGE TO AMERICA,” THE WOMEN SANG. THEY WERE THE WOMEN of the Zvizana Cooperative in Chipinge, Zimbabwe, singing and dancing an exuberant welcome. Dressed in colorful uniforms with matching head scarves they had sewn themselves, the women sang of their hard work and achievements. By working together, with the help of Lutheran World Federation, they were harvesting crops to feed their families. God had sent the rains. Thanks be to God. With outstretched arms, and voices raised, they sang from the heart: “Take this message to America!”

What is the African message to America? Is it a cry for help, perpetuating the stereotype of Africa as victim? Africa suffering from disease, drought, famine, corruption, and conflict?

The Luther Seminary Program in Zimbabwe offers students and faculty an opportunity for a rich and life-changing African cross-cultural experience, a chance to discover answers to these questions. The teachers are Africans. Luther Seminary participants *learn about Africa, in Africa, from Africans.*

¹This article is adapted from *We Can Learn from Africa: Luther Seminary in Zimbabwe, 1986-96*, by Lois M. Snook.

LOIS SNOOK and her husband Lee, Luther Seminary professor emeritus of systematic theology, are the co-founders of the Luther Seminary in Zimbabwe program.

The Luther Seminary in Zimbabwe Program, now in its tenth year, has already transformed individuals and institutions through their contact with the culture and church of Africa. Such contact will continue to enliven American Christianity.

Integral to the program is the course Christianity and Culture in Zimbabwe, exploring the relationship between the African cultural heritage and the Christian faith. What difference does the context make in the development of theology? What could western Christians learn from the holistic African worldview? What is the African understanding of God and the world? How could global mission be re-interpreted as *mutual* giving and receiving among all God's people? Do poor people have anything to give those of us in the affluent north who seem already to "have everything"?

Denise Scheer, a Luther graduate, and her husband John Musick participated in the first offering of Christianity and Culture in Zimbabwe. They worked harvesting beans on a farm owned by the Zionists,² a large indigenous church group in Zimbabwe. After their first day in the fields, Denise and John piled onto the truck that would carry them back to their lodgings. They were bone-weary, hungry, dusty, cold, and exhausted. They had blisters on their hands, and their backs ached from bending over the long rows of bean plants. As they were huddling together with the other workers to keep warm, the women in the truck began singing. How could these people be so joyful, Denise and John wondered, amazed. They seemed unconcerned about the next tasks of gathering firewood, getting water, cooking *sadza*. "For these women," John observed,

life is hard. There is a lot to be suffered. Beauty and happiness come from working together, sharing music and dance—the basics. In the United States, we think we need *things*—conveniences—to make us happy. In Africa, it is *relationships*. This moment for Denise and me was one of the most spiritual experiences of our lives.

Denise added: "It was a total integration of life and faith. We need to learn from this." Denise later accepted a call to be pastor of an urban congregation in Muskegon, Michigan.

I. RATIONALE FOR THE PROGRAM

Those who have spent time in Africa agree that though you can leave Africa, Africa never leaves you. "The African experience"³ remains indelibly imprinted on mind and heart like part of one's genetic code. It transforms, rearranges priorities, and summons to action those who have lived and worked among the people of Africa, calling for new partnerships, new models of mission, increased global awareness of the people, the many cultures, the daunting challenges, and the strengths and gifts of Africa. Who could forget an African sunset where the red sun paints the sky with pink and golden streaks before its sudden plunge below the horizon, ushering in the darkness of night? Or the countless stars highlighted by the Southern

²See Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995) especially chapter 12, "Healers and Ecologists: Primal Spirituality in Black Africa."

³Roland Oliver, *The African Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

Cross, an arrangement of the heavens just the opposite of northern constellations? The warmth of sunshine, the strength of baobab trees, the gravity-defying balancing rocks, the thundering cataract of Victoria Falls, the ancient dry mortar walls at Great Zimbabwe, wild animals in the national parks—these images are etched permanently in our memories.

Finally, however, the seminary invests in an Africa program not for scenery—as glorious as it is—but for mission. Janice Larson, a student who later served as pastor in the South Bronx wrote, “My experience in Africa through the Zimbabwe program at Luther has changed and shaped my worldview in many ways. It was in some of the great cities of Africa—Harare, Nairobi, and Antananarivo that I became acutely aware of the problems and needs of the ‘inner city.’”

Another student, Phil Hirsch, now serving a parish in Camden, New Jersey, wrote: “Africa gave me a radical understanding of ministry as servanthood. If it were not for my experience in Africa, I might never have come to serve God in this way.”

And this comment from Eugene Kreider, a Luther Seminary professor of Christian Education: “I think it would be enriching for our seminary as a community and for the education that happens here if more faculty and students could go to Africa to listen and learn—with their own theological filters a bit more porous.”

II. ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT

Africa is nothing if not alive with the Spirit. One of the constant gifts for visitors is the holistic worldview of Africa that sees no separation between spirit and world. Africa is a marvelous antidote for the dualisms that still infect the west, a legacy of the enlightenment.⁴ It is more than just naïveté that allows African Christians to understand God as active and present in their ordinary daily lives. It is their common experience, and the puzzle to them is how we from the north can be so unaware of this living reality. One repeatedly hears God as the subject of sentences among African Christians, whether they speak of joys or sorrows. God is present and active in their lives, a source of strength and comfort.

A vivid example of this faith in a present God is provided by the scene of women crushing stone to construct an earthen dam at the height of what was the worst drought in a hundred years in Southern Africa. How could these women bring themselves every day to this site when all around them the earth was parched and the streams dried up? How could they hold out hope of a change in the weather that would bring life-giving rains? They came, they sweated in the scorching sun, they crushed the rocks, absolutely confident that “God would send the rains.” And indeed, the rains did come, most particularly, in January, February, and March 1996, when the drenching rains filled the dams and rivers and allowed for the planting of what would be bountiful crops.

⁴See Lee E. Snook, *What in the World Is God Doing? Re-imagining Spirit and Power* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), for an exploration of this point. The setting and inspiration for this book was Zimbabwe.

III. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, is deceptive. It looks, in center city and certainly in the "low-density" middle-class suburbs, like a modern city. It *is* a modern city. But then—when using the telephone or making a transaction at the bank or trying to mail something at the post office—one becomes keenly aware that this modern city is located in a still-developing African country, whose people, in some fundamental ways, are still people of an oral culture. There is a real preference for face-to-face communication where one can take as much time as required to tell the story. Writing, making a plan, do not come easily or naturally to African people. In Bantu languages there is no word for "future." The closest equivalent is "the next harvest." Time is understood as a product of people's encounters. It is not chronological, ruled by the clock and measured by watches. The Greek equivalent would be *kairos*, "living in the now." Time happens when people come together especially for events such as births, funerals, worship, celebrations. And the event begins not when the clock dictates, but when the people have come and are ready. Africans will say to westerners, "You have the clock, we have the time," and indeed they fill time with wonderful human intercourse. Many African students studying at Luther Seminary have been shocked and disappointed at their encounters with fellow students who will cheerily call out, "Hello, how are you?" but never slow down or stop to hear the answer.⁵

Closely related to a different understanding of time and future is the African valuation of relationships as more important than tasks or functions. People are more important than finishing a job. Whatever an African friend may be doing, she or he will stop and give total attention to whatever a person who has come unexpectedly may need. At a minimum, one can expect a cup of tea and a biscuit, but one will also receive a warm smile and animated conversation.

A culture is most reliably examined on the ground. It is ordinary people, articulating their hopes for themselves and their families, that matter in the end. It is at the grass roots, in the villages, that one can see what is happening. Our media, reporting "facts," generally focus on the bad news. Even more problematic, the media tend to look to the political leaders, the people at the top as the best source of news. What is missed, of course, is the human story of the general population who go about their work of survival in spite of the actions (or lack thereof) of government. The Luther Seminary program strives for a good balance between the media's reported facts and the human story on the ground. Lectures by university teachers and others are sources of historical and theoretical insights, while the practical side of life in Africa is experienced through on-site visits and field trips. "Development is people," said the late Rev. Lawyers Moyo of LWF. "And it begins in the head. A new way of thinking. A process which is continuous."

⁵For a more ample analysis of the African concept of time, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1967) chapter 3.

IV. FURTHER REFLECTIONS OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY

The voices of the participants continue to witness to the value of the program. Steve Pannkuk, now serving a parish in Iowa, wrote:

I never expected or imagined to be so welcomed that first day and all through my stay with my family. My African mother even baked a cake that read, "Welcome home, Steven." Through their love and encouragement, the family strengthened my sense of call to be a pastor.

From Marty Tollefson, now pastor on the staff of a large congregation in North Dakota:

I have been suspicious of liberation theology...[but it] has taken on a new face for me, that is, an African face.⁶ The incarnation of God was present in Jesus, but also concretely in the people we meet. The Christ that I have seen walking through Kuwadzana (the "high-density" suburb where I lived with my host family) is a different Christ than in St. Paul, Minnesota. That is to say, a Christ that "crosses over" to stand with the poor, oppressed, rejected, and those that live daily on the edge....I have come to realize that liberation is a necessary part of a Christology. A Christology that does not address the socio-economic struggles is finally a faceless Jesus in Africa.

Emily Rova, a recent graduate, now awaiting a call with her husband, wrote:

When preaching, I learned that I was important to the women.... I never danced in church before....The Spirit was there....I believe whenever you take yourself out of your own comfortable atmosphere and go into another, there is only room for growth and transformation.

Finally these reflections from Fred Gaiser, a seminary teacher of Scripture who subsequently became director of the program:

Living in Africa.

A truism: the primary value of being in Africa is being in Africa. In this case, "being" means actually living there for an extended time. The Zimbabwe program offers something significantly different from tourism, attendance at a conference, or making an ecclesiastical visitation (as valuable as those things might be). To be in Zimbabwe (in one place) for an extended period means to have to figure out how to live there, to come to terms with the cultural, familial, social, religious, economic, and political structures, to learn to make one's way in that society, for it is the only society one has. This is the great gift of the program: it turns a previously unknown city into something of a "hometown"; changes a country from a geographical curiosity into a place about which one cares—has to care—because, at least to some degree, one is invested in it. Only an extended stay will do this. The Seminary's ability to provide such an opportunity for faculty and students through its Zimbabwe program is a remarkable resource....For me, Africa was just different enough (and distant enough) to make everything new, to make the routine recede, to give me back a sense of wonder, of awe and

⁶An excellent resource used in the course is Robert J. Schreiter's *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis) 1991.

delight in the everyday, in the sights and sounds and tastes of the world. This was personally restorative, but also politically and professionally renewing.

The spiritual journey

The African experience gives occasion for one to re-examine one's life. There are times in Africa when one recognizes profoundly the tenuous nature of existence, when the veneer we apply so carefully in the West is peeled back. And then there is nothing at all to rely upon except the love and good will of other human beings (if available) and the grace and providence of God. This is a moving and humbling reality. In a semi-cynical moment, I wrote in my journal, "Of course, Africa is a spiritual continent. There's just a lot to pray about!" There's a heck of a lot to pray about (in the States) as well. The gift of Africa is making one realize this in a new way.

A more significant, communal spiritual experience is given through contact with the African church. I don't want to be sentimental or naive here. No doubt, African Christianity has its own problems and surely its own very significant challenges. The explosive growth of the independent churches⁷ could be, at worst, simply another demonstration of Marx's critique that religion is the opiate of the people, offering "spiritual" escape from the real problems of the world, but, still, there was something disarming about the simple directness of people's faith and the ease with which they spoke of it and lived it. I presume this has something to do with living closer to a first naïveté, where God is seen as a player in daily life in ways that we have become too sophisticated or too analytical to name. Stone-sculptor Bernard Takawira's lament about his last visit to the United States—not knowing how to live among people who, day in and day out, make no mention of God—was a telling moment. I am a Christian who believes in God, but, as a late 20th-century American, my daily sense of the universe's cause and effect is remarkably secular. Africa's appreciation of the reality of God was moving and, I hope, infectious.

Another truism: the African church is made up of people. More important, these people now have faces, and because of our understanding of incarnation, theirs are the faces of Christ (and, for me, *new* faces of Christ). Their music has tunes and rhythms that ring in my ears. Their confessions of Jesus enliven me. Their attempts at mutual edification and empowerment through, say, the income-generating projects of the LWF give concreteness to the value of tithes and offerings. The sense of the Lutheran community and Christian community is enlarged. The need for rethinking ecumenical relations is manifest. My respect for ELCA missionaries—wonderfully gracious, hospitable, self-giving people of the gospel—develops on a whole new plane.

Two particular realities contributed to teaching and learning the Bible in a new way, for both teacher and students: (a) the recognition, because of its often direct connectedness to an African culture that was not ours, that the Bible is not and has never been a "western" book; (b) the relative lack of a library or secondary resources, which meant students had to read the biblical texts for themselves (and with one another) and come to their own conclusions about what the Bible says and means without quickly seeking the imprimatur of established opinions. The Bible department upholds both of these goals regularly. The con-

⁷The best authority on the fast-growing African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe is Inus Daneel, *Quest for Belonging* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1987).

text made them happen in Zimbabwe quite naturally.

Life was genuinely communal. As expatriates, our group of faculty and students was thrown together in ways that simply don't happen in St. Paul. We became family for one another. A kind of mutuality developed that cannot be created artificially, but can only be received as a gift.

V. LISTENING AND LEARNING

This brief narrative has shared space with many who have been privileged to learn about Africa, in Africa, from Africans. Mark Little, now a pastor in southwestern Minnesota, summarized:

Africans have a rich cornucopia of culture, tradition, religion which in dialog with other cultures can enrich the lives of the rest of the world. The West has lost much in its crazed and incessant drive for wealth and possessions, at the expense of relationships with others and with God. If the rest of the world is wise, it will listen and learn from Africa before Africa's rich treasures are forgotten and lost forever to the world. In the tiny threatened country of Zimbabwe in Southern Africa, members of the Luther Seminary community have listened and learned. "The time has come," writes Pierre Pradervand, "for us to realize that the material poverty of Africa has blinded us to its amazing human and cultural wealth, just as our own very recent material wealth seems to have hidden from us more insidious forms of spiritual, human, and moral poverty."⁸

What can be learned from Africa?

(1) *Hospitality*. A constant theme of student papers in the Christianity and Culture in Zimbabwe course was the generous hospitality students experienced in their homestays with African hosts. One is made to feel special, an honored guest, who graces the African family with one's presence. The family includes the student(s) in their daily prayers, which usually conclude with singing. For the time of the visit, the family routine revolves around their student guest. The African hosts make the student feel like a member of the family, that this is home.

(2) *Family*. In Africa the family is extended to include cousins or nephews and nieces as siblings. My sister, my brother are broadened to include the extended family, and obligation for the care of these relatives includes paying school fees, helping with clothing, and perhaps providing housing. Home generally refers to birthplace in the rural area. People may live in the cities, but their home is the village. If asked to identify themselves, Africans will say "I am the daughter of Tendai," or "I am the son of Tapfuma." Identity derives from relationships. This is not Descartes's "I think, therefore I am." The family, the community, the group in Africa are more important than the individual.

(3) *Respect for elders*. Nursing homes among black Africans are unheard of. They would be seen as cruel and selfish warehouses for the old and vulnerable, a casting out of those who have given life to the present generation. Instead, in Af-

⁸Pierre Pradervand, *Listening to Africa: Developing Africa from the Grassroots* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

rica, several generations live together as families. Children make room in their homes for elderly parents or grandparents. Indeed, age is highly regarded as the time in the life span for wisdom and guidance. *N'angas* (spiritual healers) are usually older men who practice a kind of systems counseling. If someone is sick, the *n'anga* will attempt to discover what family relationships have gone awry.⁹ The Shona aunt (*tete*) usually acts as marriage broker and counselor.

(4) *Holistic faith*. African Christianity can be characterized as integral to daily life. God is experienced as active love, a source of comfort and guidance for believers. The biblical stories, especially those of the Old Testament, are meaningful without elaborate interpretation, because as people of the land, who sow seeds and cultivate and harvest crops in rural Africa, the people *are* shepherds, farmers, tillers of the soil.

(5) *Expressivity*. Emotion and release are expressed through singing and dancing, movement of the body where mind and body are one. African art demonstrates this quality—in painting but especially in stone sculpture.¹⁰ Visitors are welcomed with music, dancing, singing, and drumming. They are sent off as well with the same joyful exuberance. Laughter comes readily among Africans who greet with smiles and handshakes. The Shona answer to “How are you?” is “I am fine if you are fine.” Greetings are prolonged exchanges affording necessary time for dialogue.

(6) *Patience*. “Waiting for the Bus” is the title of a painting in our home by a young Zimbabwean artist. It depicts an old woman, seated with her suitcase by the roadside, with her child, who is facing the other way. A quintessential experience for Africans, whose main means of transportation is their feet, is to wait—often for hours—for the bus. African patience can be confused with passivity, but rightly understood, it suggests a willingness to endure because, in God’s time, even harsh conditions of drought or misrule by so-called leaders will end.

(7) *Hope*. In their patience, Africans hope, in spite of the sufferings of daily life. They confidently hope that God will send the rain, that tomorrow will bring an end to present tribulations. Hope for a better life has sustained the people through centuries of oppression. Africans are survivors. They will endure. ⊕

⁹I have an autographed copy of *Waiting for the Rain* by Charles Mungoshi (London: Heinemann, 1975). It is a superb novel illuminating the impact of western education on traditional religion and culture, with riveting scenes of family sessions with a *n'anga*.

¹⁰Most participants in the Zimbabwe program return home with stone sculpture. Two important works by the now-deceased artist Joseph Ndandarika grace the seminary’s Olson Center. Especially important is “Holy Family” by the chapel entrance.