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Reaping what we sow: evangelizing Africa

Bill Tammeus | Jul. 29, 2010 A small c catholic

First Catholics and later Protestants engaged in what scholar Dyron B. Daughrity calls "two great waves of Christian missions: the Catholic wave in the 1500s and the Protestant wave in the 1800s." One of the targets of this evangelism was Africa, which in recent decades has seen astonishing Christian expansion.

As Daughrity reports in his excellent new book, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion* [1], in 1900, Africa had about 10 million Christians. By the end of World War II that had grown to 30 million. But today "Africa has well over 450 million Christians, and due to fertility rates that number will pass 500 million soon."

So Catholics and Protestants should be cheering our amazing success, right? Well, yes and no.

The wise religion scholar Martin E. Marty noted recently [2] that as Christianity has boomed in the Global South in recent decades, "It is impossible to quarantine the diseases of the old North's Christendom so that they do not also spread south. So the worst of the 'prosperity Gospel,' with its guarantees of material prosperity to converts, has taken over and predominates in many movements, such as in Kenya. The homophobia that leads nations like Uganda and Kenya to debate whether to condemn homosexuals to death is richly related not only to old tribal taboos, but to new-style Pentecostal churches there. And the conflicts over gay issues in the American Episcopal church are heated up by interventions on the part of Ugandan and Kenyan Anglicans."

But there's more. As *The Economist* reported in a recent piece [3], across Africa, "politicians have underestimated the drawing power of a fresh generation of Protestant churches, most of which were set up in the 1980s." Pentecostal churches seem to have the most drawing power, and though just "17 million Africans described themselves as born-again Christians in 1970, (t)oday the figure has soared to more than 400 million, which accounts for over a third of Africa's population."

I'm not suggesting that the problem is Pentecostalism. Since it began in the early 20th century, it has become a legitimate and popular expression of the faith, with special appeal to people who want an experience of the heart as much as or more than an experience of the head.

But sometimes when we graft things onto other cultures, the graft takes in curious ways. And, as Marty notes, sometimes we infect others with the diseases we have allowed to grow in our own churches.

The prosperity gospel is one, and it's no surprise that it would have appeal on a continent where poverty is so pervasive. But the gospel of wealth and health on demand is a distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we who are descendants of the Catholic and Protestant waves of missionaries in Africa and elsewhere have an obligation now to teach the followers of Jesus there that people promoting the prosperity gospel have it wrong. (Same with any gospel that would countenance putting gays and lesbians to death.)

This will be a terribly difficult task for many reasons, not the least of which is the dicey history of the ways many missionaries approached their work in the past -- a paternalistic, arrogant attitude perhaps best captured in

the novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* [4], by Barbara Kingsolver.

But if, as Christians, we have an obligation to speak truth to power -- and we do -- among the powerful to whom we must speak are leaders of some churches in Africa and elsewhere who twist the gospel into something it was never meant to be.

As we do this, of course, we must remain open to new ways of being Christian and new movements of the Holy Spirit, not simply assuming that our old ways are inviolable and the best. That may be an even more difficult job than calling African and other church leaders to task.

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