

A Brief Field Report And Challenge
Acts 13:1-3, 14:24-28, 2 Cor. 9:6-9
Pastor Phil Thrailkill

One of the best things about being a United Methodist pastor is that we are highly accountable, which means we're part of an intricate system of connections and oversight. Someone's always looking over our shoulder asking questions and asking for reports. At its best it means we're not *free agents*, though some of us may still be thought of as *loose canons*! We must regularly *give an account* of ourselves and our work. And that is one of two things I intend to do today in condensed form. First, to give a brief account of my time in Kenya, then to issue a call for cheerful giving because the two go together. Our giving to Christ through his church is one of the resources the Lord uses to fuel his continuing mission among us, a second being prayer, a third service, a fourth study, a fifth worship, a sixth fellowship, a seventh witness, all the things that— with the presence of the Spirit— help keep a church alive to Jesus Christ.

I've waited and prayed for two and a half years for a chance to teach in Africa and test some of my theories. My hunch is that third world pastors need someone to take them through a whole gospel portrait of Jesus— say the Gospel of Luke— not just a bit here and a bit there. I was to go with a team to Northern Nigeria in the summer of 2014, but in April that year Boko Haram kidnaped 276 young girls in the north and the trip was cancelled. So I waited and prayed and kept the dream alive in a secret corner of my adventurous little heart.

But a door opened this year when my friend Michael Aguanda, who leads the *Life for Children* ministry in Kenya, invited me to tour his work with nearly three hundred AIDs orphans and teach a five day pastor's school with four other United Methodists; it was an experiment in training pastors who've had little or no training. I prepared a notebook of five Lukan miracles and five Lukan parables, crafted a two hour seminar on the Apostles' Creed and a one hour short course on a simple way to pray with sick, about ninety pages in all and had them printed. The seventy manuals, with the soccer balls and suits you gave, filled a large suitcase, and when I told the Delta attendant what was in the bag, she winked and let me by with a twelve pound overage with no extra charge!

My test question was this: Can I, through a translator, help African independent pastors grasp not only *what* Luke said about Jesus but *how* he said it in large blocks of text. And if it works with a test case, maybe I can go back and teach the whole of Luke, which I can do in seventy-two hours, an hour for each Scripture sheet. Expose them in depth to one of the four gospels and give them enough teaching and preaching material for eighteen months.

The first day was awful. I felt like a total failure. My dream died right in front of me, and I felt the fool. But that was because I made a false assumption. I saw them as homogenous since they were all black and Kenyan, but they were not. I assumed they knew each other, but— with a few exceptions— they were strangers brought together for the first time, many of them subsistence farmers from small villages who'd never been to such a well-planned event. It was nearly as much culture shock for them to come together as for me to be there. And being from several independent denominations, some of them quite odd to us, they were uncertain about one another. Some bishops, some pastors, some traveling evangelists who head off for months of wandering from village to village with only a staff in hand and no money in their belts. Add to that the tribal differences and you see the complexity. And me a white guy from rich America on their turf with handouts and charts!

But day two was a total reversal. Once they got settled into the Roman Catholic retreat house with its staff of Franciscan nuns, and once they had a few hearty meals and times of singing and praying together, they found common ground and the event blossomed. When I told them that the complex harmonies of their a capella singing and the syncopated rhythms of their clapping can still be heard in the African American churches of South Carolina, it was a contact point. And when I said, "Your traditions of worship remains alive in my state," they grinned. And so the initial field trial of my proposal was positive. They like it when someone using the tools of scholarship and pastoral experience unfolds the stories of Jesus and makes relevant cultural applications. The oral traditions of face-to-face story telling which lie just beneath our gospel texts are much like the oral culture in which they're already embedded. And so when I said, "Just as your elders and fathers retold the stories of your origins and customs in village gatherings, so you must retell the gospel stories of Jesus in the same manner," something in them and in me came alive. I've been working

on the patterns of New Testament rhetoric for four decades now, and to see the insights leap cultural barriers thrilled my soul. My Professor Dr. Charles Talbert would be proud of his student. I await further reports from Michael, but the initial feedback was very positive. Adjustments are needed, but the core idea is workable. So when the day comes I am no longer under appointment, I may have a new adventure in my waning years.

I've seen amazing things since I saw you last. I've seen the sun rise over the East African plains and heard the screams of baboons outside my room at night. I've been driven through herds of thousands of wildebeests and zebras on their mass migration across the crocodile infested Mara River on their way to the Serengeti Plain in Tanzania. I've had bull elephants, towering giraffe, and fearless hyenas stare at me from the center of the road as if to say, "You are now on my turf." And, to my amazement— because I'm told it's rare— I've seen a cheetah chase and take down a baby warthog ten feet behind our van after chasing off the mother. Fast, brutal, quick and efficient. And when she trotted off forty yards and lay down in the two foot high grass for lunch, she was invisible. But it was when we passed a huge sleeping lion that I thought, "I don't think I want to get out of the van."

When we stopped with our box lunches in the middle of the day, it was under a single lone tree on a hill with no surrounding bushes and a three hundred sixty degree view in all directions. And there under the lone tree were the horns and skull and hide and a few rib bones of a wildebeest carcass: first the lioness, then the hyenas, then the jackals, then the vultures, then the ants, then us on the same spot for lunch. Moments of wonder, moments of terror, and when I was told that a lioness— only three weeks before— had given birth to three cubs only a hundred years from where I slept, I no longer went out at night. My wife is not named Jane, and I am not Tarzan, though I did watch the movie on the flight home from Amsterdam.

I've seen wonderful things since I last saw you, but the most memorable did not happen on a day in the Masai Game Park but on Thursday evening of the seminar when I had all sixty-eight pastors sitting before me at 7:00pm. When I'd asked Michael back in the summer if they knew the Trinitarian faith of the early church as found in the Apostles' Creed, he said, "No one ever taught them;

it was rejected in their circles because of the word *catholic*. Some of them have only a Bible, even only a New Testament, and they do the best they can. Phil, they have almost no training.”

So from the twenty one pages of material on the Apostle’s Creed in their manuals, I lectured on the history and formation of the church’s Trinitarian faith for an hour and a half. They were attentive as I told them how the early church gave us a list of books to be read in worship, thus the Old and New Testaments, and also a lists of teachings about the person and work of the Triune God, and how both are necessary for a healthy church. We read the church’s book rightly only when we read it through the lens of the church’s faith. Bible and Creed have different functions, and both are means of grace that depend on one another and grew up shaping one another.¹

Then came the question, and I knew it was coming. One of the Pentecostal bishops stood and said, “Our fathers,” and by that loaded word he meant *our fathers in the faith—our ancestors*, who in the African world view are not seen as absent but present and influential, “never told us the Creed, and now you show us how it is as important as our Bibles if we are to be truly apostolic. But what about the word *catholic*? Our people will not understand.” The room was silent. I was bumping up against a big prejudice and an ever bigger misunderstanding. But the answer was easy, and that made it all the sadder.

And so I answered him as the rest listened, “It is from the Greek *kataholos*, Latin *catholicus*, meaning *according to the whole* or *universal*. So when you find a Luo translation of the Creed— which is your tribal language of the hear, use your word for *universal* and have your people memorize the Creed so they carry a little Bible in their minds at all times for witness and meditation. Teach them the whole of the faith from creation to kingdom, not just the Jesus part, though that is the living center. It all belongs together: the person and work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Creation, Christ, Church,

¹ On this reading of the history and theology, see Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought To Believe* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2016), Chapter 2, “Why You Need the Creed,” 29-42.

Kingdom. God and the Gospel are not to be chopped up in parts!”

I then took a risk. Would they overcome their fears and confess together the ancient apostolic faith? I asked them to turn to the Swahili translation in the manual and invited them to stand. I then asked Barnabas, my translator, to lead them, and something wonderful happened. He Africanized it by intuition into a call-and-response format. He turned it from a written back into an oral text and from the eye to the ear. He gave them the first line, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” and they roared it back in unison, and so through every line one after the other. It was nearly a shout.

There are times when I sense God present; here it was palpable. Tears filled my eyes, and I thought of my father with his index finger on the Creed in the 1939 Methodist hymnal helping me follow it in church as a little boy. Most were confessing the faith of the ancient church for the very first time, and it had been my privilege to lay out the benefits and seek to make the case clear. Thank you for praying for me. The church still has treasures of grace to open before the world, and this was such a moment.

Before the week of lectures I spent several days walking through huge slums and over ditches of raw sewage to make home visits, rather *hut* visits. I walked at night among dark corners of the city of Kisumu where homeless young prostitutes wait outside hotels for Western tourists and where little platoons of homeless boys live and sleep on street corners under store awnings. They knew Tony, a member of the Life for Children staff who works with them and who offers shoes and clothes for their rags. Most of their parents and grandparents are dead of HIV/AIDs. I spoke a word of encouragement to each group, and when we opened the back of the van to give out the milk and bread, they sat on the curb in long rows, looked up at us and said, “God bless you.” Michael is looking for land to build a shelter. Two thousand street boys live in and around the Kisumu bus station. It is his next frontier.

The next day I sat in the mud and dung huts of remote villages with aged women who’d taken in AIDs orphans with Michael’s help. I visited their weekly support groups, which are a blend of a Wesley Class meeting, a Bible study, and a business report. Many of them have taken out micro-development

loans to start small businesses, and the meetings help them stay current on loan repayment. The untold story of the growth of the church in the third world is how vibrant Christian faith with a Pentecostal spin is being joined to communal capitalism and group entrepreneurship to raise the standard of living and give hope to the poor. Christianity may now be on the defensive here in America because of our too-easy compromise with the culture and its values, but in other places with few of our comforts, the faith is thriving because Jesus Christ means hope and life, now and later. It's not a religious decoration on the good life; it is the very marrow of life itself.

I will never forget what happened as I entered one larger hut where a dozen men and women were gathered for their weekly accountability meeting. They knew we were coming and had fixed special food, and from a hundred yards away we heard them singing songs of praise. As I entered the hut an older woman approached me swinging and swaying, clapping and singing *Jesu Bwana, Jesus is Lord*. And when she held out her hands to take mine, I did what I always do when a woman invites me to dance. I turned on my best beach shag moves! I spun her around in the middle of the hut, did a little foot work, and ended with a behind-the-back-pass-through. She looked shocked! Was this the man of God from America? The singing stopped; everyone laughed. I told them through the translator that it was an ancient and sacred tribal dance done along beaches in South Carolina and accompanied by the outpouring of frequent libations. I was tempted to sing *Mustang Sally*, but judgment prevailed, and I soon recovered my clerical composure.

I am accountable, and this is my account. And the pitch is this. Find some way to reach for a piece of Christ's mission in the world, whether it's across the street with a lonely neighbor or around the world with elephants and orphans. Just a bit beyond your comfort zone is a world of juicy, lively, risky, thrilling experience with the risen Lord. And when more and more of our people get a piece of the action, it's easy to become what Paul said the Lord loves, which is a *cheerful giver*. There's work to be done and tithes and offerings to be given to fund it. Join Lori and me next Sunday in taking a step up in your giving. Giving ten percent is a marker, but giving beyond the tithe is a joy. Invest in what God is doing through a church that is seeking to follow Jesus Christ from city center.
