

A Reflection to "From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth: Asian-Americans in Global Mission" by Theodore Agbemenu

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The source of any work of God is God himself as seen by what Paul said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who made things grow."<sup>1</sup> The activity of missions originates from God. What anybody or group of people does remains what God is doing through them. Dr. Tizon articulated how God is using Asian-American Christians to contribute to world missions. God is making "things grow" through Asian North American global missions in spite of the internal challenges. This paper will use some pertinent issues which Dr. Al Tizon raised in his presentation as a foundation and then share some observations, proposals and suggestions as a reflection on my context of Evangelical African Diaspora Community in South Korea.

#### ETHNICITY OF MISSIONARIES

The writer designates the group he is discussing with these words, "This paper gives attention to such a case—Asian Christians who have made North America their home and who have begun in earnest to engage in global mission."<sup>2</sup> Asian North American (ANA) is an ethnic as well as (a) religious category. In highlighting what God is doing with Asian North American Christians in world mission, the writer has shown the global mission activity of a group of Christians located in a particular geo-political space.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 3:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> A. I. Tizon, *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth*, 1.

## MIGRATION AND THE CREATION OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

The description “Asian Christians who have made North America their home” underscores the essential relationship between migration and religion in the world. Professor Jung Sook Lee, a historian at Torch Trinity Graduate University writing on the history of the Korean diaspora, confirms that “plantation labors were primarily recruited among Christians,...it is easy to see traces of a church-centered life even after immigrating to America. A good example of this is the Hawaii Honolulu Korean Church which began their history with the immigration in 1903”.<sup>3</sup>

### GLOBAL MISSION OF ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN CHURCH

The paper suggests that the Asian North American Church is not merely a Christian community but a church that engages in well organized and coordinated global missions. The concept of churches becoming missional is an undisputed imperative according to Jesus’ commandments in Acts 1:8 and Mathew 28. I personally experienced Asian North American global mission last year summer. An ANA congregation had a mission outreach to the migrant workers in Korea. They run a program they dubbed “SPARK”. The mission brought the gospel and compassion missions to over one hundred migrant workers.

### MISSIONS CONFLICT

Talking about church conflict one writer cast the story in the form of joke:

Among the over two million Koreans living in America, there is a running joke that speaks of their immigrant experience. It goes something like this: When two or three Chinese gather together, they start a restaurant. When two or three Japanese gather together, they start a

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<sup>3</sup> Sang-Bok David Kim, ed. *World Mission Vision of Korean Diaspora*. (Seoul, Korea: Torch Center for World Mission. 2014), 31

corporation. When two or three Koreans gather together, they start a church. And then the church splits.<sup>4</sup>

I commend Tizon for not only defining what he meant by “broken household” but also devoting space in illustrating the “brokenness” in the “true story”.<sup>5</sup> The root of the conflict was in the differences in concepts of mission present among Asian North American Churches.

Even as mission remains a key component in the ethos of ANA faith communities, insiders know all too well the internal church issues that at first glance appear to be barriers to authentic mission. These issues of which I speak arise primarily from the experience of immigrant churches in North America, which in time find themselves in an intra-cultural, intergenerational struggle.<sup>6</sup>

#### SOME GENERAL REMARKS ON CONFLICT AMONG BELIEVERS

Human community or relationship would experience some sort of tension in one way or the other. Conflict within missions communities is as old as Paul and Barnabas’ missions conflict. Even before the conflict between Paul and Barnabas over the choice of missionary associates, the early church in Jerusalem experienced conflict. But that conflict was resolved by the apostles. The theme of Lausanne III was on “Reconciliation”. When the church engages in unresolved conflict it not only somewhat hinders our mission but also casts a slur on our credibility. “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?”<sup>7</sup> My continent Africa has experienced genocide in a country that had a large number of Christians. What should have been the role of the church in those conflict countries? If the church is unable to resolve her own conflict how can it solve the conflicts of the world? The divisions we see in our churches could be minimized through love and a strong desire to leave in peace with one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Sang-Bok David Kim, editor *World Mission Vision of Korean Diaspora*, 35

<sup>5</sup> Is Sandi a false name and her experience “a true story”?

<sup>6</sup> Tizon, *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth*, 2

<sup>7</sup> I Corinthians 6:2

## DOING MISSIONS INSPITE OF “BROKENESS” – INTERNAL DISPUTE

Do we get all cleaned up from all of our shortcomings, divisions, and conflicts before we do missions? God qualifies those whom he has called. Tizon zeroed in on the critical issue of his paper in the following sentences:

The question of the church’s readiness “to change the world for Christ” in the face of its own conflicts, shortcomings, disagreements, generational misunderstandings, etc.—in a word, its brokenness—is an important one and certainly not limited to ANA churches. How indeed can broken, dysfunctional households called local churches, themselves in desperate need of God’s grace and reconciliation, possibly be in a position to bear witness to the good news of Christ in the world? <sup>8</sup>

To my understanding this is the definition of “broken” families in his title and the question he tried to answer with his paper. Tizon rightly asserted that, “For if nothing else the Bible attests to a God who intentionally chooses and uses broken imperfect people to accomplish God’s purposes.”<sup>9</sup>

## COMMENTS AND PROPOSAL ON SOME CRITICAL ISSUES

Tizon recommended four “both/ands” to “negotiate the tensions between first and second/third generations in ANA churches”: <sup>10</sup> Discussing on the subtopic, “*Multicultural outreach*” he insisted that “every church need to strive to be multicultural in order to be faithful to the gospel” He affirmed the statement, “The answer is yes and yes” every church should work towards becoming multicultural community. By saying “yes” Tizon has also generalized a North

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<sup>8</sup> Tizon, , *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth* , 4

<sup>9</sup> II Corinthian 4:7; Romans7

<sup>10</sup> Tizon, *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth* , 9

American situation as normative for all Diaspora churches or immigrant churches everywhere <sup>11</sup>

Must ethnic churches naturally evolve into multicultural congregations? I think the answer is Yes and No. Among most diaspora churches in Korea, multiculturalism is not the goal of the churches. It is my opinion that the expectation that ethnic churches “*need to strive*” to become multicultural congregation is good but it depends on the vision of the church. My observation among some diaspora churches in South Korea (Filipino, Indonesian, and African congregations) revealed that they do not have plans to mix in worship. These churches are attracting their nationals and cultural groups; ethnicity is the fuel on which the churches are running. (Is the United States Church still organized along color lines? Has the observation that Sunday morning is the most divided moment in the USA changed?) Jesus is the foundation of the church but parishioners usually feel “comfortable” with their own ethnic/race groups.<sup>12</sup> In this case ethnicity is the missions strategy in building some migrant churches in South Korea. At the same time, I should add, ethnic churches must have an accommodative and welcoming attitude toward other minority ethnic people among them.

One of the important issues in the paper has to do with “*Local and Global.*” Tizon explained that “Jesus did not command in Acts 1:8 that we are to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem OR Judea and Samaria OR to the ends of the earth. He said “and.” Indeed the church’s outreach must be local, global, and everywhere in between.”<sup>13</sup> I agree and wish to suggest that every church has the responsibility to participate in evangelizing the least evangelized continent on earth – Asia. Hence the church in Africa should not finish solving their problems or healing their “brokenness” before helping others in Asia through evangelism, church planting and social work.

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<sup>11</sup> Tizon, *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth*, 11

<sup>12</sup> I think this is the main argument of Donald McGravans, HUP

<sup>13</sup> Tizon , *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth* ,11

## AFRICA'S "BROKENESS" AND GLOBAL MISSION

Intertribal wars, genocide, diseases, and acute poverty are often the "single story" told about Africa. We have been on the receiving end of Western missions for centuries. However, the African church has engaged in global missions in spite of her "brokenness." In a recent gathering of African mission and church leaders in Abuja, Nigeria as part of post-Lausanne III reflections, participants observed the migrating trends from and to the African continent:

We are witnessing unprecedented levels of people moving on, from, and into the African continent. A large proportion of these find their way into cities in Africa and in many other parts of the world where they gradually, but often dramatically, change the social landscape. We were excited, for example, to hear about the presence of close to a million Chinese in Africa and of the vibrant churches in all parts of the world where Africans form a significant proportion of the membership and leadership.<sup>14</sup>

## EVANGELICAL AFRICAN DIAPORA CHURCHES IN SOUTH KOREA

The movement of people around the world is like a mighty flood which government legislations could not stop. Many factors have been responsible for the influx of people from one region of the world to another. Some of the factors include globalization, wars, climate change, and economic disparities among nations. Other reasons are famine, epidemics, religious persecution, social discriminations, trade, education, and political persecutions. Seeking better conditions of living in the destination nation is another reason why people move. Some of those who move seek better democratic political systems. The cities of our world and economic hubs of advanced industrialized nations play host to the modern migration of people. Contrary to some

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.maniafrica.com> (MANI 2011) Assessed September 30, 2014. (MANI stands for Movement for African National Initiative).

public opinion industries benefit from the inflow of cheaper foreign labor to supplement their internal labor supply in order to maximize profit.

The Protestant church in Korea is just over a hundred years old. Korea produced the largest local church in the world. The exponential growth of the Korea church is beyond description. Christians all over the world are looking up to the Korean church as a model of evangelical church growth. Korea was a total homogenous society until recently when over one million foreign citizens called Korea home. Refugees from Africa consider Korea one of the hospitable destinations in the world. Migrant workers from Asian countries have contractual opportunities to take temporal residents in Korea. The rapid economic boom has attracted foreign business communities to invest and live in Korea. Foreign students have found Korean universities capable of handling foreign students. Foreigners who married Korean citizens constitute a significant percentage of foreigners who have Korean citizenship and have become Koreans.<sup>15</sup>

The Korean church has taken notice of the opportunity of the presence of foreigners and has instituted home missions outreach to them. We have national/ethnic churches like Filipino churches, Indonesian churches, Mongolian churches etc. There are also International churches which cater to mostly European and American citizens. Some of these congregations are denominational and others are interdenominational. Some operate under local Korean churches while others were started by independent Korean missionaries.

A significant number of African diasporas resident in South Korea were already Christians prior to their arrival. They were products of the phenomenon growth of Christianity

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<sup>15</sup> By January 24, 2011 One hundred thousand (100,000) foreigners have become full citizens of Korea (Arirang TV “In Focus” )

on the African Continent. With their unique ecclesiology, African Christians in Korea have created a separate religious space for themselves in order to give expression to their faith. One of the pastors of an African congregation in Korea explained that due to cultural differences between the Koreans and the Africans it was more convenient and comfortable to organize an African congregation for African believers. Evangelical African congregations have dotted the whole of Asia – from China to Malaysia. Wherever recent African immigrants are, the Christians among them would found a community of worshippers. Beyond meeting their special cultural and liturgical needs, they felt they have a debt to pay in gratitude to God for the gift of salvation. African Christians in Asia consider their presence as God-given opportunity to share the love of God.

#### CASE STUDIES OF EVANGELICAL AFRICAN DIASPORA CONGREGATIONS IN SOUTH KOREA

In 2006 an African church decided to initiate mission in South Korea. The church brought money from Africa to start, support and sponsor the entire new church plant project. After the first church was planted, three more local congregations were planted across South Korea. Presently they have a total of four thriving and strong evangelical African Diaspora local churches. The majority of the memberships are African Christians. There are a few African-Americans and Koreans. After the pioneer missionary who started the church moved on, the Christians were discipled by an African tent-maker pastor who was working with a multinational company. At the moment they have a full-time pastor, commissioned from Africa, who oversees the four congregations with the help of local part-time African pastors. In a typical worship service, preaching was done in English which all the members understand. The songs were a mixture of African rhythm and English lyric. African language songs were also sung. The church

is called “Redeemed Christian Church of God”. Their world headquarters is based in Nigerian where they commission foreign missionaries around the world. “Redeemed Christian Church of God” is an African Initiated Church. The Redeem Christian Church of God Church in South Korea has also helped to plant other congregations in other parts of Asia. One author observed that “Nigerian Christians are reshaping global Christianity.”<sup>16</sup>

Another Evangelical African Diaspora church who has their Asian base in Japan has planted a daughter church in South Korea. Lay leaders see to the day-to-day running of the church in Korea while the missionary visits regularly from Japan. Majority of the members were already active Christians before they arrived in South Korea. The Church of Pentecost is an Indigenous African Church which has her world headquarters in Ghana.

Evangelical African Diaspora churches in Korea are here to stay. African Christians in South Korea constitute a significant number of foreign residents. What would be their future? Will these churches evolve into multicultural congregations or will they remain ethnic/cultural/national churches? What would they be named? Are they foreigners’ churches or Korean churches? It depends on what perspective one comes from. Are these migrant churches in Korea typical “diasporas” churches? (African national governments call them their “diaspora”) What is the rate of foreigners’ integration into Korean society? These are issues African Christians in Korea have to deal with.

Would foreigners’ churches be extinct in future because of South Korea’ immigration policy? I don’t think so because there are intermarriages between Africans and Koreans. There are also Christian African diplomats who are part of these congregations. There are national-

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<sup>16</sup> Allan L. Effa. “*Releasing the Trigger: The Nigerian Factor in Global Christianity*” (International Bulletin of Missionary Research Vol. 37, No. 4) , 214

African-Americans (Nigerian-Americans and Ghanaian Americans etc.), and African Americans who are active members of the evangelical African diaspora community in South Korea. There are Christian businessmen and women from Africa trading on permanent basis with Korean companies; some of them (African traders) are leaders in these (African) churches. There is constant flow of Christian African International students into South Korea. African refugees fleeing wars and persecution have also been granted full refugee status by the South Korean government.

#### PROPOSALS FOR GLOBAL MISSION TO ASIA

- A. I propose a *Spirit*-empowered missions.<sup>17</sup>
- B. The Asian-American church in global missions would serve as a bridge between the Southern Church (non-western/non-Caucasian church) and the Northern Church (western/white church). Asian-American citizens have dual cultures and understanding. The best way to do this is to *appreciate* the missions of Asian-Americans (who represent both western and non-western churches) – Transnational missionaries!
- C. African Church in Asia should *appropriate* the benefits of a “South-South” cooperation. Non-western church from Africa have a lot more similarity with Asian churches in politics, worldview, and economics. African and Asia are non-westerners.
- D. My proposal then is that the majority church in the non-western parts of the world and Western churches should work in *partnership*. We should still honor and encourage our

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<sup>17</sup> Acts: 1:8 (Typical African Christian worldview understand the importance of spiritual warfare.)

Western brothers and sisters even though “the epicenter of Christianity has shifted from the North and West to the South and East”.<sup>18</sup>

- E. *Being*<sup>19</sup> “Peace advocates” on a divided peninsula should be part of the social responsibility of the African church since African Christians experience many wars themselves.
- F. Practical help to the aged and the destitute of Asia: Pastor Adelajah, a Nigerian missionary/pastor in Kiev had a thriving social program in his church for the needy. .
- G. Language learning: African Christians in Koreans in Korea must learn the Korean language because they are commissioned to reach all the people without Christ in Korea. For the Korean churches who are planting ethnic congregations in their churches or elsewhere in South Korea among migrants, I propose that they learn the language of the language group/nationality they have chosen to reach. For example, a Korean home missionary plants a Vietnamese congregation for the Vietnamese migrants living in Korea. The missionary may want to lean the Vietnamese language instead of grooming them in Korean language and culture. I guess Sandi had already learned Spanish and would use Spanish for the Hispanics in America instead of teaching them English for congregation life and worship.

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<sup>18</sup> Tizon , *From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth*, 1 (Romans chapters 9, 10, and 11).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G15AOfaaxkE> Assessed October 9, 2014

(Al Tizon speaks at the 2014 International Ministries All Staff Gathering at the Green Lake Conference Center in WI.)