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Forging Connections Once Again



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As we celebrate Black History Month, I have been struck by the thought of what it means to make history. I don't believe that many of the civil rights leaders that we celebrate today set out with the intention of having their names in books or being celebrated every February; they merely saw wrongs that needed to be rectified. The first missionary from North America, a black man by the name of George Liele, most likely did not care about being the first of anything, but simply saw the suffering happening in Jamaica and decided to act. How many people are currently serving the Lord's kingdom without realizing that they're making history in the lives of those they serve?

Just like Coming Home

Recently, I led a group of leaders from the Cleveland Baptist Association (CBA) to Burundi with the hope of rekindling a partnership in mission with the Union of Baptist Churches in Burundi (UEBB). This partnership originally began in 2001, when International Ministries helped to facilitate relationship-building between CBA and UEBB, and in 2002 a covenant was signed between the two organizations. However, due a change in leadership at CBA and to new priorities brought forth by the new administration, the relationship between the two bodies did not grow to its expected potential.

We, however, serve a God through whom all things are possible. When the Reverend Yvonne Carter accepted the call to serve as executive minister of CBA early in 2014, we discussed the possibility of revisiting a partnership with UEBB. The initiative gained traction, and later that year I traveled to Burundi with a delegation of three CBA leaders, the Reverends Yvonne Carter, Ronald Maxwell and Nathaniel Williams with the intent of staying just over a week to preach at local churches and discuss what a renewed partnership between CBA and UEBB might mean in the future.

After preaching on Sunday and meeting with UEBB leadership early on Monday, the four of us took an afternoon trip to visit some of the local churches that this reimagined partnership would effect.

Every time I take a team of African Americans to Africa, I am amazed to see how they are received by Africans and to hear the testimonies with which they return. This trip was no different. We were drawn in by the warmth of welcome in every church we visited. Most interesting was how familiar it seemed. As members of African American congregations, the CBA delegates and I shared the sense that, in spite of the geographical distance, these churches felt like home. Thousands of miles from Cleveland, leaders from CBA worshiping in Burundi could have been just blocks away from their own front doors. As we fellowshiped with our spiritual brothers and sisters, we received words of welcome and food for our bodies, while our hosts expected us to share with them the word of God, food for souls. Soul food.

On Thursday, we left Bujumbura, the capital city, and traveled through the country's interior on a several-day tour of some of the oldest and most prominent churches in Burundi. We returned to Bujumbura to ready ourselves for the Sunday service, marking the close of our week with UEBB. Together we gathered at the Kinama Baptist Church. The sanctuary was packed, and the Rev. Carter delivered a powerful message, exhorting Burundian Baptists to be "prayer warriors." The next day, the team from Cleveland left Burundi, having re-forged their partnership with UEBB and made ministry history.

There at the Beginning

Historically, African Americans were among the first missionaries in Africa, with many serving from the 1800s to 1930. However, history also tells us that they were later forbidden to serve in Africa due to the colonization of the continent. The foundational work of these black missionaries had coincided with the work of explorers like Stanley Smith and David Livingstone, who revealed that Africa was rich with natural resources such as timber, gold, diamonds and copper. The colonizing powers often exploited local human resources as they sought to export the land's natural wealth, and they feared that African Americans could influence the indigenous peoples to revolt. These influential forces made it impossible for African Americans to serve in Africa.

In the absence of African American missionaries, God used mission agencies to send Caucasian missionaries from Europe and the United States. At the same time, the colonial administration was promoting the concept that Africans were inferior to people of European descent. As they felt this message imposed upon their society and saw that all of the missionaries in Africa were white, many Africans came to believe that God only trusted white people to be missionaries.

A People of Mission

During my tenure as general secretary of the Union of Baptist Churches in Rwanda, I noted that for the short time that African-American missionary Judy Smith (later to become Mrs. Judy Allen) was with us, church growth was exponential. Although Judy was a high school teacher and did not preach a single sermon, she had an immeasurable influence on our ministry. Her presence as a missionary on the same level as her Caucasian counterparts made Rwandan Baptists realize that the Great Commission doesn't have to be monopolized by one race, because it is for blacks as well. God trusts us with his mission. This energized the local congregations to reach out and play a role in the Great Commission, and the difference was incredible!

And now the three representatives from the CBA have reminded Burundian people that they too are entrusted with God's holy ministry. When we were in Burundi, Baptists did not simply see the delegates as people from Cleveland; they saw themselves in these three visitors. They understood that, just as God was using my three fellow travelers for his work, so was he waiting to do great things through them. The Burundian Baptists thanked God for showing such a trust.

African Americans were there at the beginning of international mission. They have passed through many years of trials and tribulations, but now as I see renewed partnerships beginning to arise and a growing recognition that the Great Commission is for all races, I thank God that they are once again demonstrating that they are a people of mission.