

Research Projects: African Christian Diaspora in Europe

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In 2000 (Pretoria), we reported on the **Council of Christian Communities of an African Approach in Europe** which was inspired by the second International/Interdisciplinary Conference held at Westminster College Cambridge in 1999 under the title *Open Space: The African Christian Community in Europe and the Quest for Human Community* (material published in IRM LXXXIX No. 354, July 2000). This gathering focused on the pastoral, regional and empowerment aspects among African diasporic churches. Its name signifies two aims: 1. The Council does not perceive itself as just preserving race, religion and culture but becoming a catalyst for healing and bridge-building. 2. It concentrates on *inclusion* not exclusion, i.e. tries to network between a great diversity of African indigenous (AICs), Evangelical, Pentecostal-Charismatic, Sabbatarian, and the older Catholic and Protestant traditions, anglophone and francophone groups, Africans from the continent and those from the Caribbean and America now dispersed across Europe. The Third International/Interdisciplinary African Christian Diaspora conference in Hirschluch near Berlin, in conjunction with **Humboldt** (Berlin) and **Rostock universities** and the **Hamburg Mission Academy** (also the **German Society for Mission Studies** attending) took this further. Under the topic *The Berlin Congo Conference 1884, the partition of Africa, and Implications for Christian Mission today*, it attracted more than 120 participants from many African and European countries, the Caribbean and America. From the letter of invitation: "By linking the conference with the historical epoch after the Berlin Conference (1884) and the partition of Africa among European nations, the organisers intend to set a *symbolic sign* by serving as an interface between scholars in this field and religious practitioners: academia and grassroots pastors, oral and literary history and theology, European indigenous and African Christianity. The aims are:

- to examine the historical and socio-political consequences of the partition of Africa for the continent and the African Diaspora, highlighting issues such as migration, racism and sexism;
- to look critically into the political role the Christian mission played in colonising Africa, as well as into the paradigm shift in mission today locally and globally;
- To inquire into the significance of diverse indigenous movements (not least pentecostal) emanating from the Two-thirds-world in their struggle for survival in dignity, as well as their interaction with religious and secular European institutions;
- and in all these aspects explore the practical consequences, not least giving Black women a prominent place in the proceedings.

The conference displayed an impressive number of papers of remarkable academic quality to be published with the Wisconsin University Press (African and African Disaporic Religion) in 2005, editors Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff and Klaus Hock. Besides the scientific part, the program included country reports, a visit to seven historical sites in Berlin as a colonial capital, joint worship, and a rather moving ceremony of confession of 'past sins' and reconciliation between white and black academics and pastors. One of the striking aspects throughout was the willingness to "wed academic discourse with ecumenical engagement". This meant "bridging the divides of nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, denomination, and the academic study of religions and its practice in the real world of believers." (Deidre Crumbley)

The *historical* aspects addressed "deconstructing" colonial mission, and the role of modern charismatic Christianity in reshaping the religious scene in Africa and the Caribbean in a holistic and pragmatic approach to life and faith, which spills over into the diaspora. Under socio-political aspects, emphasis was on the gender issue and the role of women in African churches, on transcultural perspectives, and comparisons between African migration within the continent, to Europe and the USA. The missiological aspects connected Pentecostalism, modernity and migration, examined the new missionary dimension of people who deeply believe that (as a sign of independence and contextual adaptation) they have a global responsibility to spread the 'good news' in Africa and the wider world, and observed that new Christian movements begin to deal more effectively with issues of poverty, disease and powerlessness. Practical aspects included the situation in Rwanda ("what kind of Christianity?", the HIV/Aids debate, ecumenical partnership in Europe, and replacing the negative image of Africa with the "art of struggle and survival".