

Christ and Cultures

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In 1755 a group of Ulster Scots began meeting in Mecklenburg County to organize the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church with the Rev. Alexander Craighead as their pastor. Craighead was active in the "Great Awakening" and an enthusiastic supporter of the American Revolution. The congregation he helped to found is still worshipping in Charlotte on the corner of North Tryon Street and Sugar Creek Road.

That area of town is popularly described today as "in transition." The church is located on the northeast side of town, where there has been a good deal of industrial activity as well as commercial building. The neighborhood streets around the church are still leafy and even attractive in a 1940's sort of way, but many of them look neglected and tired. This neighborhood's young families have moved elsewhere.

But the church has stayed. Its pastor now is a gifted young African American, Eulando Henton, a graduate of Louisville Seminary, who has done much to help the church recover its identity and mission. He and his wife, Hyun, a native of Korea, greeted me as I entered the church's fellowship hall on a Sunday afternoon in May. One of the church's ministries is to welcome the folk who have not left that part of town but who have moved in and stayed. A largely Vietnamese congregation meets in the late afternoon on Sundays, sharing in a vigorous worship led by their own ordained Presbyterian minister, Phuc Nguyen, who also helps prepare the delicious repast that often follows worship. I have had the privilege of attending these services and sharing in these meals, and both are occasions of real joy.

But another group meets earlier in the afternoon, and this group is made up of people mostly from West Africa. Their pastor, Yao Thomas Agbemenou from Togo, is a student at the seminary where I teach. Thomas invited me to worship on this Sunday when his congregation would be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Togo's independence. Thomas had designed this worship service in part to thank God for the end to colonialism, but also to caution his people against the perils of independence and freedom. Thomas preached in French and in one of the native languages of Togo and occasionally in English. His text was Isaiah 61:1-2, and he spoke on what it means "to proclaim liberty to the captives." The congregation was filled with young people who needed little prompting to burst into exuberant songs of praise. The singing was accompanied by drums, pipes, various instruments of percussion, and piano, and usually involved movement, not just swaying back and forth, but almost a kind of conga line, or as I preferred to think of it, a kind of Exodus journey, threading its way through the fellowship hall. There was a lot of clapping and smiling.

One of the most impressive parts of worship was the children's choir, made up of eight young girls between the ages of five and thirteen (I would guess). They were clothed in their native dress and were covered with some kind of decorative tracing on their shoulders and faces. They sang and danced to the songs they were singing. They were full of joy, lovely in their praise of God.

As I watched all of this and tried as hard as this thoroughly white, Western, proper Presbyterian could to keep time and clap and lift up my arms, I began to think about those Ulster Scots who settled this area and planted this church some 250 years ago.

They came to this part of the world to hold down the frontier for the more genteel folk back east. They were a tough crowd and not afraid of very much, which made them good settlers for the Piedmont and mountain areas of what was then a distant colony of the British Empire. They brought with them their Westminster Confession of Faith, a stern and unyielding form of Calvinism for a determined and fearless people. They did not do much dancing in church, I suspect, though in other places perhaps a good deal, and some drinking and hollering as well.

And now, into the church they had made had come a new set of immigrants from West Africa, beating drums and swaying and dancing — all to the praise of God. These new immigrants were settling a kind of urban frontier in neighborhoods which others had largely abandoned. These folks worshipped God with their bodies, dancing, clapping, moving around, lifting up their arms. Trying to participate with them, I got tired. Here was something strange: worship made me tired, as if I had been in a workout — not bored, not despairing, not waiting for something else to happen, but bodily tired, a kind of “good tired” that does not usually happen to me in worship. If the chief end of human life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever as those Ulster Scots insisted so long ago, then maybe they and these more recent immigrants have more in common than one might think. Glorifying and enjoying God is a robust activity that demands a good deal of oneself.

Where is the church today? This service took place on the fourth Sunday after Easter, but I was hearing the gospel preached in various tongues so that all who were present could understand it, and though I saw no tongues of fire resting on each head, I did see folk who were filled with the Holy Spirit dancing and singing and praising God, a Pentecostal moment come early to a Presbyterian church.

What is the future of the church? I don’t know and I don’t trust those who claim to know. But I wonder if the church is not going to look more and more like what I saw on this Sunday afternoon. And I am not thinking just of the different cultures represented or the impact of new immigrants or the more exuberant style of singing and dancing. One thing I noticed: Jesus is very important to these folks. They talk about him a lot, and they sing praises to him and insist that he is powerful. They do not hesitate to call him King of kings and Lord of lords. He heals their diseases and saves them from all manner of evil. In some ways he occupies a much more central place in their worship than he does in the Westminster Confession. Yet in all of their talk about Jesus and in all of their affirmation of his lordship, their words are not triumphalistic or defiant, but simply the glad language of gratitude and praise. When you are poor, living far away from home, struggling to make it in a culture whose strangeness is a daily feature of life, these affirmations of faith lose their smugness and become ways of simply telling the truth.

I don’t know that I saw the future of the church, but I do believe I glimpsed something of the Kingdom. In any case, there was a refreshing lack of concern about “the future of the church” or the survival of our denomination. Rather, these folks seemed “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”