

Thinking about Discipleship in Changing Contexts: Perceptions of Church Leaders of an Episcopal Diocese in South Sudan

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Introduction

*Why this research?*¹ The idea for this study is a combination of my own interest and my participation in an IZB- and GZB-funded² research project on *Church and Secularization* by Professor Herman Paul at the University of Groningen. In my initial interviews with African Christians and leaders, I found that secularization is mainly seen as a Western problem. At the same time those interviewed did see the need for effective discipleship in the African church in order for the gospel to have more impact in people's lives and in society.

In his positioning paper for the GZB conference “Declining Religious Participation: Secularization and Discipleship in Africa” (Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, December 11–12, 2014), Herman Paul states that in the West “... [we] begin to realize, not only the conceptual imperialism inherent to applying secularization language to non-Western contexts, but also the *difficulty* of understanding changing patterns of religious life in other terms than secularization.” The question now is “... how to interpret declining church membership rates or changing attitudes towards God, church, and religion ...” in non-Western contexts. “The point is not to apply Western secularization theory to Afri-

¹ I thank professor Herman Paul for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this report.

² Two mission organizations within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands: IZB focuses on mission *in* the Netherlands, while GZB supports the worldwide mission of the church.

can case studies, but rather to examine what *modes of praying, listening, thinking, and speaking* about declining religious practice exist in Africa – with the purpose of learning from them and investigating to what extent they can provide Western churches with better (theological) resources for understanding their own situation.”³ This report contributes in a small way to these questions and issues.

Research question. I chose the word *discipleship* as the keyword in this research because this is one of the ways in the Diocese of Kajo-Keji (DoKK) to describe the state of the church: the church is seen as healthy when its members are being disciplined. When this is not happening, the church is not healthy, even if it has a large number of members. The discourse of secularization is not used to talk about the situation in the diocese. It is mainly used to talk about the decline of Western churches.

This research was done in the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, in the Diocese of Kajo-Keji. The reason is that this church has a vast membership of which a large percentage are inactive members. At the same time we see that the diocesan leadership of the church has made evangelism and discipleship priorities in the mission of the church.⁴ Another factor is that this church has experienced very different contexts: its members have lived in exile and they now experience freedom in an independent country. I wanted to know what language diocesan leaders use to describe growing and declining participation in their church. Why are people not disciplined, and how can this situation be changed? Are the answers to these questions framed in a different narrative than the one used in Europe about secularization?

³ Herman Paul, *Declining Religious Participation: Secularization and Discipleship in Africa*, Positioning paper for a workshop at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, Egypt, December 11–12, 2014, dated: August 28, 2014; an elaborated version has been published as: Herman Paul, “Secularization in Africa: A Research Desideratum,” *Cairo Journal of Theology* 2 (2015): 67–75, <http://journal.etsc.org>.

⁴ A resolution of the 2013 Diocesan Synod says: “Synod resolved that *Evangelism and Discipleship* should be promoted and strengthened in all parishes so that more people will come to Christ. (Rom. 10:14–15).” This reflects the priorities of the Diocesan Strategic Plan 2013–2015.

Research methodology. In order to answer the research question, I have looked at relevant strategic documents of the DoKK⁵ and interviewed a number of key leaders in the diocese.⁶ This research is limited to the Diocese of Kajo-Kejo of the Episcopal Church in South Sudan and Sudan and does not automatically apply to other denominations or to the whole of South Sudan.

Historical context. Before I can present my findings I have to say a few things about the historical context of South Sudan as a whole and especially about the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Kajo-Keji.

First about the country. Sudan became independent in 1956. The first Sudanese civil war started in 1955 and lasted seventeen years. Through the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972, South Sudan became an "Autonomous Region." When Sudan was declared an Islamic state under Shari'a law in 1983, the second civil war started and this war lasted for twenty-two years until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. This agreement lasted until 2011 when South Sudan declared its independence.

Then about the church. It was in 1929 that the first Anglican missionaries reached Kajo-Keji to start mission work in the area. They opened a school, provided basic health care, and shared the gospel. In 1946, Lazaro Tongu was ordained as the first Sudanese clergy in the Kajo-Keji area. Around 1947, the message of the East African Revival came to Kajo-Keji via Uganda. "They challenged some of the traditional beliefs and idol worship. [-] The whole life of many people in the area was transformed. Many

⁵ I had access to the Strategic Plans of 2009–2013 and 2013–2015 and also to documents of Diocesan Synods from 2008 onwards.

⁶ I have interviewed nine Diocesan leaders of which one by email, the others face-to-face. We used English. A summary of the interview was sent back to them for approval. Because of time constraints, I have not interviewed any of the pastors or church members in the parishes. It is my impression that the outcome of this research will not change much by including them but it would give the research a broader basis.

gave up smoking and alcohol consumption, habits considered sinful in the Revival Movement.”⁷

The people of Kajo-Keji speak the Kuku language, one of the dialects in the Bari cluster. The Bible in Bari language was published in 1976. The Diocese of Kajo-Keji was formed in March 1986, and the first bishop enthroned in 1997. The current bishop, the Rt. Rev. Anthony Poggo, was elected and enthroned in 2007. The diocese has eight archdeaconries, sixteen deaneries, fifty-seven parishes, five sub-parishes and more than one hundred preaching centers.⁸

Kajo-Keji County is found in Central Equatoria State and it borders Uganda in the south. It is situated west of the river Nile and it covers 5,760 km² of mainly arable land. According to the 2008 census, the population is almost 200,000. It is estimated that 75 percent is associated with the Episcopal Church.

Findings

State of the Church – Past and Present

How do Diocesan leaders see their church now compared to the situation in the past? The socio-political context has changed dramatically: from living in exile to living in an independent South Sudan. What is the impact of this change for the church when we look at discipleship?

Quantity versus quality. All leaders that were interviewed made a statement like: “We have the numbers [of Christians] but faith doesn’t go as deep as it should.” Many people get baptized and at confirmation services many are confirmed, “but we don’t see the impact of these numbers in the churches.” Most of those interviewed say that this is because of a lack of teaching and follow-up. A number of the leaders say that teaching was better in the past. The former generation learned to read and write during catechism class. This took one or two years. Also confirmation

⁷ Oliver M. Duku, *The Gospel comes to “Dreamland”: A History of the Church in Kajo Keji* (Nairobi, 2014 [reprint]), 26.

⁸ According to DoKK Strategic Plan, 2013–2015.

class was done more thoroughly than now. Many give the impression that in the past the spiritual health of the church was better. But some don't agree with this: "Also then people were not disciplined," and "The teaching was not better then."

Spiritual versus physical. What was the emphasis in the mission of the church now and how was it before? All seem to agree: "We are strong in development issues and working on infrastructure [now] but there is a gap in our spiritual development." This also has to do with the context. During the war and exile, "the Word was like a medicine for healing." Now as a church in the newest nation, there is a strong focus on building schools and churches and development. One person says: "Even the Revival Movement is focused more on development and social services now than on spiritual growth."

According to many the spiritual development needs more attention: "The late Bishop Manasseh used to say: I want to build a cathedral in the heart of the people. That is priority number one. The physical buildings will come later."

According to one person, it is not only a matter of context but also that in the past Christian ministry was defined as a spiritual discipline only. Christians were not supposed to do business because that was seen as a worldly matter. Now the church is promoting holistic ministry.

More versus less committed. The majority of leaders stated that people in the past were more committed to the faith and church. During the period of exile, there were many fellowships of believers for the revival movement, women, and for youth, and Christians eagerly attended these fellowships. That is not happening anymore. Why? One leader says: "During the exile people shared their suffering and hardship together during these fellowships. They also had more time." He adds: "The challenge for the church now is to see how we can make the gospel relevant in our time when people are busy with their lives and work."

Several leaders also noticed that Christians were more willing in the past to work voluntarily for the church. "They would receive their [spiritual] payment later." That attitude is now much less apparent.

Pastors lacking motivation and vision. This point is mentioned often: "We lack teaching in our parishes because some of the clergy have not been trained properly." One person says that 50 percent of the pastors are not living in their parishes. They don't give pastoral care and counseling. They are "Sunday-pastors." Someone else says: "Some pastors are not focussed on discipleship because they think that repentance is enough."

According to one person, it is not so much that pastors are not willing as it is that they are not able: "They lack knowledge, vision, training, and good materials. They have not been discipled themselves, so they don't know how to do it."

Youth is left out. A number of leaders are concerned that the youth don't get enough attention in our time. During the exile, the youth took an active part in fellowships: "We had good, active choirs then. It changed the lives of youth."

Someone else points out a generational conflict: "The Church has a lot of *don'ts*. Youth don't like that. They want to see things, and put them in practice. The older generation want to keep to traditions. We see few youth in our churches."

A Disciple and a Church Member

I asked the nine leaders: how do you define a disciple of Jesus, and is there a difference between a disciple a church member? Most people responded with words like "follower" or "learner." One person said: "A disciple is a person who has committed his life to following in the footsteps of Jesus. Day by day he is willing to learn, to practice the faith, and to grow more like Jesus."

A church member is not necessarily a disciple. A member is just there but not active or committed. A commitment to following Jesus is the feature of a disciple. "A member is everyone coming to church. Not committed, baptized, or not, but not born-again. His lifestyle is the same as the world."

What does that mean in practice? What does a disciple do? Here people mentioned the following: reading Scripture, obeying God, praying, teaching others, witnessing, showing compassion, and promoting unity.

Table 1: Negative Influences on Spiritual Growth and Solutions		
<i>Priority</i> # of times mentioned	<i>Negative Influence</i>	<i>Solution/Strategy for Discipleship</i>
6	Poverty, illiteracy, conflicts and trauma are obstacles to faith and to growth in faith.	Social services in the community (e.g. income generating projects). Holistic mission.
5	Lack of teaching in the Church, e.g. wrong ideas about infant baptism (that it is the same as salvation) or the emphasis on outward behavior, like not drinking or being a polygamist.	Strong and relevant teaching in the Church. This needs training of pastors and lay readers.
5	Traditional practices like rituals relating to birth, marriage, and funerals. Social pressures make people forget about Christian faith. Also traditional healers have a negative effect. This can lead to syncretism.	Strong and relevant teaching in the Church. This needs training of pastors and lay readers.
5	Modern life. Wanting to satisfy the body and looking for money. Searching for better jobs. Doing business. No time left for religion. Youth are attracted by disco and modern dancing. For men and boys drinking is a temptation.	Strong and relevant teaching in the Church, especially for the youth. Also: weekly discipleship classes and other fellowship groups.
4	Pastors that are not committed to their ministry or who lack a vision for discipleship.	This needs training of pastors and lay readers. Visionary and servant leaders are needed.
4	Discipleship is not seen as important.	Disciplines like reading the Bible, personally and in groups.
3	Pastors and lay readers don't know what to teach.	Good contextualized teaching material in the Bari language.
2	The lifestyle of some of our leaders can be a stumbling block. Lack of servant-leaders in the Church.	This needs training of pastors and lay readers.
2	Different denominations that are criticizing each other don't help. People move from one place to another and don't grow in faith.	Unity among Christians.
2	People don't know about Christianity.	Disciples must multiply themselves. Evangelism and open air preaching.
1	Worship not addressing the heart.	Contextualized worship

Negative Influences on Spiritual Growth and Solutions

What are negative factors, both outside and inside the church, that influence spiritual growth and discipleship? What can be done about this? See table 1.

The Church in Ten Years

Thinking about the purpose of the Church gives focus to the question of discipleship. What shall the church look like in ten years' time? The following features were mentioned, in order of priority (depending on how many times this feature was mentioned):

1. *The church is missional*: "The purpose of the church is to disciple the nations, to reach the unreached, to teach them, to help them grow and become Christ-like."

2. *The church is transformational and holistic*: "In situations of conflict, Christians must respond differently than non-Christians. Christians must bring change to the world." And also: "She is able to care for the spiritual and physical needs of its members."

3. *The church is for all people*: "Also youth and men are active in the church."

4. *The church is self-funding*: "Our church will stand on its own feet. We will be funding major developments ourselves."

Africa and the West: How Can We Learn from One Another?

Both in Africa and in the West discipleship is getting higher on the agenda. But our contexts are very different: while the church in the West is getting smaller, the church in Africa is growing. Do we have enough in common to learn from each other in this area? Most people said: yes, we can learn from each other. We learn by comparison. Several said: "The West can help us to prevent making the same mistakes they did. The West is a learning ground for us." The West can also learn from Africa: "From our enthusiasm and our vigor to love God" and to see "why we have numerical growth." And: "Africans can also go to the West. Africans can show people in the West the light of the Gospel." One person

summarized: “We have to work together and share experiences and resources to fulfil the mandate of the Great Commission.”

One person felt that our contexts are very different: “We don’t know about secularization in that sense.”

Observations

In this section I will summarize my findings and interpret them. Table 2 shows how discipleship and religious participation is labeled in the past and the current context.

Table 2: Discipleship in Changing Contexts		
Area	Church during exile and war	Church after CPA (2005)
Quantity vs. quality:	Quality of faith was higher	Numerical growth is there but spiritual growth is lacking
Spiritual vs. physical:	Focus on spiritual matters	Focus on structural development
Level of commitment:	More committed to faith	Less committed to faith
Leadership:	Pastors lack training, seemed more committed	Pastors need more training, not committed to discipleship
Youth:	More active in fellowships	Church not attractive for youth

Disciple as a committed learner. A disciple is described by all leaders as someone who is committed to follow Jesus and learning from him. A member is someone who is associated with the Church but not active, and in his lifestyle there are few features that are different from non-Christians.

With an estimated 75 percent of Kajo-Keji county belonging to the Episcopal Church, there is a danger that church membership becomes something to be expected when you live in this area. Although the church wants to be a church for all people,⁹ it is clear from the definitions above that current diocesan leadership wants *members* to become *disciples*.

⁹ This is an ongoing debate between the Revival Movement and Church leadership. While the Revival Movement is focusing on Christians that are born-again, Bishop Anthony Poggo stated that he is “a bishop for all members of the Church.”

Negative influences on discipleship and strategies. In table 1 I have tried to link the negative influences on spiritual growth with the proposed solutions given by those interviewed. We note that the socio-economic context, lack of good teaching in the church, traditional culture, and the pressures of modern life are seen as the biggest threats to discipleship. Holistic ministry and the training of church leaders are the most important solutions to reverse these influences.

The future church. Asked how the church should look in ten years' time, those interviewed see a church that is strong in teaching, evangelism, giving, and serving. There is optimism and hope that the Church can have an impact in the lives of its members and in society as a whole.

The first two features (missional and transformational) are surprising since the church is now already growing in numbers and is bringing change to communities. Apparently, those interviewed felt that this is not yet enough.

From Africa to the West. Most leaders felt that we can dialogue in the area of discipleship. For Africa, the West is a negative example from which it can learn. It is also interesting that a number of leaders talk about sending African missionaries to the West. For them it is clear that the old paradigm of doing mission in the world Church is a thing of the past.

Conclusions

Based on what is presented above, I have come to the following conclusions:

1. The problems and solutions regarding discipleship development are similar to what we find in other places in Africa and the world.

2. It is interesting that the leaders who were interviewed seem to follow "a narrative of decline": In the former context of exile we were more focussed on spiritual life and more committed to the faith. Although we do grow in numbers now, our commitment and spiritual life is below standard. In his inaugural address, Herman Paul showed how this "master narrative of decline" has

been the prominent paradigm for understanding secularization in Europe.¹⁰ This parallel is quite unexpected and striking.

The problem with such a narrative is that it can have “discursive power.” The narrative starts to guide the way we think, act, and seek solutions.

3. According to those interviewed, the future church should especially be missional and transformational. Even though there is numerical growth in the Episcopal Church in Kajo-Keji and it has an impact on the development of the county, the interviewed leaders felt that they should do better. As long as the negative influences on spiritual growth are reversed by holistic ministry and leadership training, they feel the church can progress and improve. Apparently the discursive power of the narrative of decline does not reach far into the future.

4. If what is true for the Diocese of Kajo-Keji applies to other contexts in Africa, then these perceptions of growth and decline in religious participation provide a powerful rationale for building more partnerships between African and Western churches and institutions for the purpose of sharing experiences and learning from and with each other in this area.

¹⁰ Herman Paul, *Ziektegeschiedenissen, De discursieve macht van secularisatieverhalen* (inaugural lecture, University of Groningen, September 24, 2013), <http://www.rug.nl/staff/h.j.paul/oratie.pdf>.