MANI: IMPLICATIONS

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Some thoughts on the implications of the MANI consultation for the church in the west.
Category: Africa

This is the third of my posts on the recent MANI (Movement for African National Initiatives) consultation. The previous posts looked at my impressions of the meeting and the issues raised; in this one, I'd like to look at the implications for the church in the West.

So, why should Christians in the West be interested in a conference of African church andÂ mission leaders? Here are a threeÂ reasons;

They Are Interested in Us. I was very touched and gratified by the concern that many of the leaders at MANI showed towards the church in the west. Three issues kept reoccurring;

- *The rise of Islam.* Many African leaders see Europe as being under a grave threat from Islamic expansionism. As I said yesterday, this is something we find hard to imagine here in our part of the world.Â I have no doubt that much of what was said about this at MANI was an oversimplification of a very complex situation. However, we would do well, nevertheless, to heed the concerns of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who have the benefit of looking at our society from the outside.
- *The refugee crisis.* It is not just in Europe and the US that TV screens are filled with images of people desperately trying to migrate into Europe; they see these same scenes in Africa, too. The African church knows something about conflict and mass migration and they know that it can be difficult to deal with, but provides an opportunity for the church to demonstrate the reality of its message.
- *The State of the The Church.* African leaders are under no illusions about the health of the church in Europe. From their point of view, they see a church which is struggling, is morally compromised and which is desperately in need of revival. They are aware, too, that to some extent, they owe their existence to Western missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa. They feel indebted to us and perhaps now is the time for them to return the favour, which neatly raises the second point.

Africa Is Already Here. The African church is not something exotic and colourful which happens on the other side of the world. You can find African Christians in all of our major towns and cities.

- *The Disaspora Church.* There are thousands of diaspora churches in the UK, it is the sector where most growth in the church is happening. It tends to be the larger Nigerian and Ghanaian denominations that attract attention, but there is much more to the scene than this. You can find churches from many nationalities or language groups; one friend mentioned that he knows of 50 Kenyan churches in London. Herein lies the problem. To a great extent, the diaspora churches are ethnically or nationally based and they tend to have very little impact on the British population. This was a concern to the leaders of a mission network, like MANI. They see a need for the diaspora churches to break out and have an impact in the towns and cities where they are based.
- *Mission Outreach.Â* I was surprised and gratified to hear a few stories of African churches and

Christians purposefully setting out to do mission trips to the UK. It was remarkable to hear their stories. However, it was also a concern, because none of the European leaders their knew anything about these initiatives. One of the great mistakes of Western missionaries is to do things in Africa without adequate consultation with the local church leaders; it would be a shame if African missionaries to Europe started to do the same thing in reverse. Africans coming to Europe need cross-cultural and contextualisation training to witness here, just as westerners heading south do.

The Future. We'd better get used to it; the future of the church lies in Africa, not in the West. If you want to know what the church will look like as the 21st century progresses, you need to spend time with Christians from Africa. We tie ourselves in knots over all sorts of issues in our small corner of the world, but these are increasingly irrelevant to a world-wide church which growing exponentially while we indulge in the modern equivalent of counting angels on a pin-head.

The biggest challenge facing theÂ church in the west is knowing how to find our place in the world-wide Christian movement. We have something to contribute, but we also have much to learn. One thing is certain, we are no longer the leaders of the church (if we ever were). My fear, is that we will continue to turn inwards and not play our part in what God is doing around the world. If that happens, we are the ones who will lose out. We need the worldÂ church much more than the worldÂ church needs us.