

**Address of the Reverend Doctor Abraham Adu Berinyuu to the E.H. Johnson Annual Award
Lunch, Saturday June 1st, 2013 at Seneca College, Toronto**

Moderator, Commissioners, Guests and Supporters of the E.H. Johnson Committee, Fellow Christians, Good afternoon – we gather today united by a common concern for the mission of the church of Jesus Christ in the world. By God’s grace we are strengthened and renewed to return to our own particular mission fields. I am deeply honoured that the E.H. Johnson committee has honoured the work that has been my career and calling as worthy of recognition as “being on the Cutting Edge of Mission”.

However, I feel keenly that the honour of this award rests not only on the individual recipient: Abraham Berinyuu; but also on the Presbyterian Church in Ghana; the Republic of Ghana as a whole; and in particular the Northern Region and the University of Development Studies in Tamale where I live and work.

I wish to express my gratitude to God and the Christian community for this honour. I would also like to convey warm Christian greetings to The Presbyterian Church in Canada from the Presbyterian Church in Ghana – and the E.H. Johnson Committee for the foresight in instituting this award and sustaining it. Ghana is grateful to The Presbyterian Church in Canada for its historic assistance in various fields.

As a beneficiary of PCC assistance, I studied in Toronto at Knox College, obtaining an M.Div from Knox College in the 1980’s and returned to Knox under the auspices of the E.H. Johnson Trust as a visiting scholar ten years ago. By the grace of God I am what I am today.

Please understand that the greater part of my academic work and writings have been concerned with theological questions around health, healing and disability. As a child of five I contracted polio in the outbreak of 1958. It was not until I came to Canada around thirty years later that I understood my paralysis had been caused by a polio epidemic. In the African context there were many other explanations. You will recollect that the disciples asked Jesus, *“Lord who sinned – this man or his parents – that he was born blind?”*. This kind of thinking was prevalent in the community where I grew up. Discovering the word “polio” and finding the huge world-wide community of polio survivors freed me from that fatalistic fallacy – and provided me with a lifelong personal and academic interest.

Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Today, I have been asked to speak on some work that I did in the 90’s to help bring about reconciliation in a small but violent ethnic and religious conflict in Northern Ghana. The world has become acutely aware of religious divisions between Christians and Muslims in Africa. Christians fear for their brothers and sisters in such settings and I am sure that this explains why you wish to hear about this aspect of my work. I hope to suggest to you that attitudes and stereotypes concerning disabled people are not too dissimilar from attitudes and stereotypes concerning those who do not share our religious views.

In Ghana, as in many parts of the post-colonial world, national borders were determined by European treaties, rather than by the linguistic or ethnic boundaries that pre-existed colonialism. Thus by imperial fiat, the new nations that came into being were some of the world’s first multicultural communities. The ethnic – religious – linguistic groups thus yoked together mostly exist in harmony united by new national identities – but not always. And this brings us to the conflict in Northern Ghana.

In 1994 the world heard a cry in the middle of Northern Ghana, popularly called Genuume post war. Many lives were lost and much property was destroyed. Many others have written about it.

I do not intend to write more on this war story other than to use this 15 minutes I have to point out briefly what I have come across in my search to bring healing to a sad story.

In 1994, a crowd gathered in the North Yendi area in a market place around the village of Sabebgbo. War erupted as a result of the disagreement that broke out among them. Depending on who you speak to, the Muslims will say it started in a church; and Christians will say it started in a mosque. The war spread quickly as if all the villages were already waiting for this disagreement to come out and people involved to respond. Within hours, nearby villages were fighting each other and houses and churches were burning. Women and children started moving in droves. Friends became enemies.

The original story had the dispute based on the sale price of a guinea fowl that escalated into a violent clash of religious differences.

As time passed, this “guinea fowl war” spread to other villages. It spread to Salaga, Damongoa, and stopped there. It did not spread to Tamale (where my family and I live), about an hour away by car. People started roaming on the village roads asking each other for their identities. In a few months, some names of Kokomba young people were mentioned as those responsible for the war. The Kokomba were Christians and they were targeted as a result. As is frequently the case, this narrative was joined by a story of Muslims being attacked by Christians. Priests, pastors and imams were numbered among the victims.

I finished studies for my Ph. D. in Edinburgh in 1995 and went back to Ghana. By the time I arrived home, the church was already attempting to solve the problem. They decided that they needed someone familiar with the Northern Ghanaian culture and people. They knew that I had counselling and other skills and that my own ethnicity meant that I would not be seen as coming from any of the tribes fighting. Both the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Church asked the Presbyterian Church of Ghana to lend me to them for a short time. Bread for the World, an international non-governmental organization, decided to pay for the cost of a program of implementation of peace and conflict transformation for two years.

At that point my life was very changed. One of the only things I knew that I clung to was that prayer was important. I asked God what to do with angry Muslims and simplistic Christians whose conflict by then was driven by raw emotions. With the benefit of many years of reflection, I will share with you some of the lessons I have learned.

1. Acceptance

I have learned in pastoral theology that to fully accept another person or party there has to be full disclosure on both sides. One cannot encounter a person fully without fully accepting the other. And one cannot encounter or accept without full disclosure. “This is who I am.” But authentic disclosure will not occur without full acceptance. For the churches in Northern Ghana, authentic disclosures and full acceptance were only possible if the questions addressed to Muslims, were asked in such a way as to increase their sense of self - worth.

The person - either Muslim or Christian – must fully accept themselves as worthy; and not view their worth as under attack. At the same time the conflicted parties must come to recognize each other’s

worth. To see themselves – and the other – as God sees them; to accept that God loves them without reservation or distinction. You will readily understand that this principle comes into play in the interactions experienced by a disabled person in his or her community.

2. Useful Principles in Conflict Resolution

Self- disclosure. To gain full acceptance of oneself, one must be prepared to fully disclose who you really are to yourself. This equally applies at the religious community/tribal level. This can be done by retracing one's steps on an interior journey into self with an itinerary of self-discovery. Why am I here or when did I get here? What is your role in being here? In the case of the church in Northern Ghana we may have done our mission in a way that perhaps contributed to this problem.

Develop an alliance. They may not necessarily be a friend or someone you like, but you need to work together to achieve something. On the ground it was important to defuse the practice of making mosques no-go areas. The symbolism of acceptance must be just as powerful and plain as the symbolism of rejection. "This is our place" using "we language" rather than "they/them" language. This decoding of the language and symbols of separation may be all it takes for the situation to turn itself around and create room for the other to begin to think differently of his or her antagonist.

One concrete example of trying this was Public Education. Public education was disrupted by the war. The public school teachers had fled during the war, but because of the missionary schools, Christians had access to better education that was not available for the Muslim community. This impacted the vocational and financial prospects of Muslim students further exacerbating the conflict.

The charity, "Bread for the World" agreed to pay for some salaries and repair schools damaged by the war. Since many areas in Northern Ghana have no street lighting, the churches gave lanterns to Muslims during their pastoral visits that were provided by Bread for the World. Ratcheting down the level of conflict turned out to be as simple as sharing clothing, lanterns, and visiting each other for religious holidays. This proclaimed to "the other", that you matter. Your Christmas Matters; Your Eid matters. Public places and space are open to all the public. You matter – we accept you – and we matter – you accept us.

It is simplistic and usually wrong to narrowly define such conflict as strictly religious. Almost always such conflict has economic and political roots as well. You have to find ways to express your conflict without killing each other.

Too often reconciliation and full acceptance are blocked because differences between groups are presented in "code". We use "code words" for the other: X-tribe; Y-tribe; X-religion; Y: religion; X: healthy; Y:disabled. And along with the code words come stereotypes in the form "they always do this"; "they always take that"; "they are selfish, they are greedy, they are grasping. They take all the good land." And so the code word gives birth to the stereotype that reinforces the prejudices and ancient slights that perpetuate the conflict.

A Dagomba proverb goes, "If you want to know the secrets of a village ask the cripple." This proceeds from the stereotype of the disabled person who merely sits at their favourite spot all day observing everything that happens in the village.

You see the process: code-word “cripple”: stereotype “passive watcher incapable of productive work”. We readily understand this process at work in ethnic and religious conflict and have seen it tragically manifested around the world. Only when there is full disclosure to self and other; and full acceptance of self and other, as the creatures of God’s making, can true reconciliation begin.

Thank you once again for your generous invitation to speak to you today. I pray that in some small way you will go forward armed with some new tools for reconciliation, following our time together.