

Partnership Coordinator for Africa

Visit to Nigeria

16 – 23 November 2023



National Cathedral. Abuja. Nigeria.

Purpose of Visit:

- **To attend the 60th Anniversary All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) meeting in Abuja.**
- **To visit our partner, Zongkwa Theological College, Kaduna State.**
 - **To visit Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Jos.**
 - **To gain an understanding of the context in Northern Nigeria.**

Dr. Andrew Ashdown.

Methodist Church Nigeria.

The Methodist Church Nigeria was established in 1842 by the efforts of missionaries of the Methodist Church in Britain, and was administered by the Methodist Church in Britain until 1969 when the Methodist Church in Nigeria was given autonomy. In 1976, the Church embraced constitutional episcopacy and is now led by a Prelate, assisted by Arch-Diocesan and Diocesan Lay Presidents. The Church has its' headquarters in Lagos and is now made up of 108 Dioceses with Missions reaching out to Zambia, United States of America and the United Kingdom. There are over 5000 Methodist Churches in Nigeria.



With Nigeria Secretary of Conference, Bishop Taiwo and Prelate of Nigeria, His Eminence, Dr. Oliver Ali Aba.

Visit to Jos. 16-18 November 2023.

I had been keen to use the opportunity of attending the AACC meeting in Abuja to include a visit to our partner, the Zongkwa Theological College in Kaduna State and also to visit a couple of Christian Institutions in Jos, Plateau State. Jos, situated a 5 hour drive north-west of Abuja, is the 'centre' of the Christian presence in northern Nigeria. The city has a long history of missionary endeavor including the establishment of Christian churches and Theological Colleges of various denominations. It is also a centre for Christian-Muslim engagement. For that reason, my first visit was to the Theological College of Northern Nigeria.

There are multiple tribes in the ‘Middle Belt’ – 52 ethnic groups in Plateau State alone. Inter-cultural and interreligious tensions have long been present. The British colonial government brought in Muslim immigrants as a labour force who subverted the local, predominantly Christian population. Despite the fact that it is estimated that 70% of the population of Plateau State are Christian and 30% Muslim, the Government is Muslim. In recent years, over 100 churches have been destroyed in widespread ethnic violence that provokes retaliation and has increased tensions across the Sahel region.¹

The Christian Institutions seek to strategically locate themselves as providing solutions to the many challenges in the region.

Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Jos.

The Theological College of Northern Nigeria is ecumenical in its’ composition, evangelical in its’ belief and practice and was the first theological institution in Northern Nigeria. It is ‘owned’ by 17 different denominations embracing 10 Christian traditions, offering a wide scope of Theological training and foundation. The College offers Diplomas, Bachelors, Masters, Doctorate and Post-Graduate degrees. The College is also home to a ‘Centre of Religion’ and a ‘Centre for Public Theology’ and seeks to be a place of interreligious dialogue.



Visiting and Preaching at Northern Theological College, Jos. Nigeria

¹ On Christmas Eve, 2023, 148 Christian villagers were murdered in Fulani attacks on the village of Bokkos, 78kms from Jos, and a further 48 villagers were murdered in nearby Barkin-Ladi. (France24.com 27 December 2023). The All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom for Religion or Belief has examined multiple drivers of conflict, including resource competition, religious sectarianism, poor land management, population growth, climate change and insecurity.

Zongkwa Theological College, Kaduna State.

To serve the Theological Training and Development needs of such a large Church, the Methodist Church Nigeria runs three Theological Colleges that train lay and ordained Ministers in the Methodist tradition. Only one of these - the Zongkwa Theological College - is situated in the north of the country. Historically supported by MCB, the Zongkwa Theological College was established in 1995 by Sir Hassan Odukale in order to provide Theological Education in the north of Nigeria. The purpose was not just to make it easier for those who may not have the capacity to travel to the south for theological education, but also to be a visible Christian presence and witness amidst the significant Muslim population in the region.



With Staff at Zongkwa Theological College.



With Students at Zongkwa Theological College.

Since 1995, over 200 Ministers have graduated from the College, though it continues to face significant challenges. These include:

- Insecurity due to interreligious and tribal violence in the area.
- Lack of funds.
- The need to expose staff and students to multi-cultural, inter-ethnic and inter-religious issues.
- How to fund the education of poorer students.
- Funds to build a wall or fence completely surrounding the College grounds to provide security from attack.
- Provision of computers and internet access.

Zongkwa Theological College is the only Methodist Theological Institution in Nigeria that trains women as well as men. There are currently ten women students. In response to the challenging context in which it is situated, the College also runs courses in Muslim-Christian relations and Conflict Resolution and aims to provide constructive training in these areas for all whom it trains.

The Methodist Church in Britain is pleased to support Theological Education, particularly in areas that experience such vulnerability and volatility. And we too have much to learn from such contexts.

It was a privilege to visit the College, especially since it had not been visited for about 15 years due to the sensitivity of its' location. The journey from Jos took 4 hours by road and it took a further 4 hours to reach Abuja. Attacks against Christian villages in the area are frequent and last year, extremists kidnapped students from a nearby Catholic Seminary. The College is situated in a 'yellow' zone according to the British Foreign Office Travel Advice Category and just a few miles from a 'red' zone.



Zongkwa Theological College Campus.



Exam Hall.

All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is an ecumenical body that encompasses over 200 million Christians across the African continent and is a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. It is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous Churches in Africa with 210 members comprising of Churches, National Councils of Churches, Theological and Lay Training Institutions and other Christian organizations in 43 countries.

AACC was formed in 1963. It seeks to foster and sustain fellowship and unity among the Churches of Africa for common witness and service to help the people of Africa through its strategic positioning in the continent. The AACC works through and with member churches in the continent to address issues facing the people of the African continent in a proactive and prophetic accompaniment of churches in Africa. AACC has worked in recent years to promote sustainable development and gender and climate justice. In 2022, an All Africa Youth Congress met under the banner “Africa: my home, my future.”



Opening Worship of the AACC Meeting in Abuja.

The General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki reported the following: *“In the past five years; our work has been running under four main programmatic pillars,” he said. “Theology, interfaith Relations and Ecclesial Leadership Development, Gender, Women and Youth, Peace, Diakonia and Development, and Advocacy at the African Union.”* He continued: *“In addition to the four programmatic pillars, there were two main organizational pillars: Governance, Membership Development, and Networking, and Effective Management and Sustainability.”*

Under the title, “The Love of Christ compels us..” and building on the success of the previous five years, the Conference established a new strategy for the AACC to focus on key issues in the next five years. These include: Climate Change, Migration and People Trafficking, People with Disability, Conflict and Peacemaking, Health, Economic Justice, Population growth, ‘misleading theologies’, Peace and Security, Mission and Evangelism, and Church and Community Transformation.

Revd Dr. Mwombeki said: *“The strategy has a strong focus on African young people as key stakeholders in AACCC’s programmatic work. 70% of Africa’s population are young people below 30 years and the strategy focuses on facilitating their holistic development into transformative and responsible leaders.”*

“The new strategy provides room for the AACCC to partner with its members, Ecumenical Partners, Development agencies, Civil Society Organization's, Governments and multilateral institutions, foundations and private cooperations, and Academic institutions in pursuing its vision for churches in Africa together for life, peace, justice, and dignity. It also offers guidelines for governance, membership development and networking, and Effective Management and sustainability of the fellowship.”

The Churches represented at the Conference renewed their commitment to addressing these issues.



Baptism at Methodist Cathedral, Abuja. With Presiding Bishops of Ghana & Kenya & GS of AMC.

During the Conference, I was given the opportunity to speak and bring greetings from MCB. The physical ‘presence’ of MCB was both deeply appreciated and extremely worthwhile. It was an opportunity both to meet many of our partner Heads of Churches, to ‘connect’ with members of other African churches, and to learn more about the context of African Christianity across the Continent.