

Family Reunion

Reformed Churches Gather in Ghana

by Allison Salerno Trevor

Last summer, five members of the Princeton Theological Seminary community joined more than 1,000 other Christians from around the world gathered in Accra, Ghana, to share their faith in Christ. For the Princetonians, the experience was transformative in ways they didn't expect.

One American seminarian experienced culture shock, even though he had lived off the coast of Africa for several years. Another American student realized that the oft-cited U.S. dichotomy between liberal and conservative simply doesn't exist for African Christians. A PTS student who is a minister in Angola came away with the sense that his work will only have meaning if he can help transform some of the political and social inequities in Africa. And PTS's new academic dean, who has traveled worldwide, was captivated by the dynamism of the cultural and religious life in Ghana.

The occasion was the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), an international network of Reformed communions, including the Presbyterian Church (USA). The general council, which meets every seven or eight years, ran from July 20 to August 12, 2004. The gathered Christians (1,000 delegates plus numerous visitors) came from more than 200 Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, and United churches in more than 100 countries.

"What this enabled us all to do was to see our own cultures through another's eyes," said Corey Widmer, a 2005 M.Div. graduate. "It caused a lot of friction at times, because we were confronted with things we took for granted."

Widmer, from Signal Mountain, Tennessee, attended the council along with fellow PTS students David Watermulder, Coutinho Moma, and Nena Amogu and professor Darrell Guder. Guder is professor of missional and ecumenical theology and the Seminary's new academic dean.

Countless Princeton Seminary alumni/ae were among the participants, including Setri Nyomi, WARC's general secretary, and Eriberto Soto, a pastor from Florida who grew up in Brazil, and was moved by the seamless wedding of evangelism and social justice that he found in the Ghanaian Presbyterian churches.

Sessions were held at the University of Ghana at Accra, but included visits to two sites of former "slave castles" on the Ghanaian coast—at Elmina and Cape Coast. In the dungeons of these castles, slave traders held Africans until ships arrived to take them to Europe and America, where they were sold into slavery. Moma, an Angolan earning his master's degree in theology at Princeton, called that visit "one of the deepest events in my life."

"We were there as descendents of our forefathers, our foreparents—slave traders, slave owners, even those who were slaves themselves," said Moma. "The impact of the dungeon was somehow deep in different ways for all of us. Some people were remorseful, some thought of what their ancestors suffered. Some cried."

The theme of the two-week WARC council was "That All May Have Life in Fullness," based on chapter ten of the Gospel of John. Participants discussed the threats and challenges to life in the twenty-first century, while seeking God's will for the human community's response. Moma called it "a special occasion because of the way we addressed openly" the political and economic imbalances between the West and the rest of the world. "We have never had discussions in the U.S. in such an open way," he said.

A minister in the Evangelical Congregational Church in Angola, Moma has been a member of WARC's Executive Committee, as well as a regional leader in his own denomination. When he leaves PTS, he expects to return to Angola as a teacher to prepare and train leaders and to involve the church in a social ministry that "empowers



The doorway through which slaves were sent on their descent to the slave ships.



The opening worship service of the Global Institute of Theology (GIT) at Trinity Theological Seminary.



El Mina Slave Castle: The Portuguese and Dutch held slaves here before exportation. Within the castle there is a Dutch Reformed chapel where people worshiped directly above the female slave dungeons.



Left to right: Corey Widmer, David Watermulder, and Judy and Darrell Guder

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches represents

75 million Reformed Christians

in 107 countries

and 218 member churches/communions (Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, and United) with roots in the 16th-century Reformation led by John Calvin, John Knox, and others.



Three Kenyan women in their traditional dress at the closing GIT banquet

pare and train leaders and to involve the church in a social ministry that “empowers people to free themselves from poverty and all its consequences.”

The conference left him with many questions.

“I found we have a challenge,” he said. “Our work will only be meaningful if we allow ourselves to transform the current trends of life.”

Most startling to Moma was learning at the council that globally 24,000 people a day die from poverty, malnutrition, and preventable diseases, and that the income of one percent of the world’s richest people equals the income of the poorest 57 percent. He also was scandalized by the threat that humans in the industrialized world pose to the earth itself, putting at risk life on the planet as the drive for profit by transnational corporations increasingly damages the environment. In 1989, he learned, one species of non-human life disappeared each day, while incredibly, 11 years later in 2000, that figure had increased to one species every hour.

“How do we dedicate ourselves to contributing to changing that,” he asked. “This left me with huge and serious questions.”

Widmer traveled to Ghana with David Watermulder, now a third-year student from northern California. They were selected to be students at the Global Institute of Theology, a program that ran parallel to the WARC meeting. They lived at Trinity Theological Seminary in Accra for a three-week residential seminar devoted to “exploring new frontiers in mission.”

Joining them were about 70 theology students and new pastors from all over the world, including Jamaica, Cameroon, Holland, Germany, Canada, Indonesia, and Ghana itself.

Widmer called it “a crucible for self-criticism.”

By way of example, he explained that Africa “is a very communal culture. The whole understanding we have in the Western world is that we as individuals have inalienable rights, and that our most basic identity is as individuals with great value. That idea means nothing in African culture. There the individual receives identity from the community he or she lives in. That difference was very difficult for us Westerners to understand.”

Those differences played out during the Global Institute. “We [Westerners] said and did things that were offensive,” Widmer said. “For example, the way we interacted in the classroom. We were forthright in our opinions. Even if we didn’t know the others in the class, we would be very outspoken.”

“Africans believe you don’t have the right to say those strong opinions until you have established deep trust. For the first two weeks in Ghana, most Westerners realized that we failed to respect those unspoken rules that were culturally in place, rules that we didn’t recognize because we have a more individual framework. That made it very difficult at times, but it also made the experience really enriching. We were able to recognize things that we have taken for granted.”

As a North American, Widmer says he is accustomed to the “liberal versus conservative” paradigm among Christians in the American church. In Ghana, he learned that worldwide those categories do not exist. “African Christians hold beliefs that both liberal and conservative camps in the United States have staked out for themselves,” he explained.

“I was able to see sides of the Christian gospel message that I don’t see in our own North American culture. For example, the African Christians I met care passionately about justice for the poor, which is typically a liberal issue here. But they also care passionately about evangelism and converting people to faith in Jesus Christ, which we associate with conservative Christianity.

“It’s really moving to see the Holy Spirit at work in these cultures revealing what it means to African Christians for Christ to be their Lord,” Widmer said. “It makes me realize that I want to be a more global and creative Christian.”

Watermulder grew up in the San Francisco Bay area, and called experiencing life among Ghanaian Christians a real learning experience. “I learned that people in other places have their own Christian views,” he said. “They are both wholly Christian and wholly African. That was

really interesting to see. Some elements of African Christianity would not fly in the United States. It would be hard to imagine drumming in my congregation in California. But if you told an African church that they had to have an organ and choir robes to praise God, that wouldn’t be OK either.”

Watermulder’s participation in the Global Institute of Theology was just one part of a summer spent in Ghana. He did a summer internship as a youth pastor at Grace Baptist Church in Kumasi, the nation’s second largest city. He had spent two years in the Cape Verde Islands with the

Peace Corps after college. Even so, Ghana was still “a culture shock,” he said. “People live in tin shacks, no one has a car, they ride bicycles everywhere. We learn a little about Africa in our seminary courses, but usually what we hear about is the booming growth there, and how the continent is more Christian than North America. I went there with this in my mind, and I wasn’t prepared for the poverty, the differences in daily life and in lifestyle.”

He was also able to experience firsthand what he learned about in his seminary courses. “On Sunday mornings, the streets are teeming with people going to church,” he remembered. “There are churches everywhere.”

The dynamic Christian community in Ghana reflects a worldwide shift, explained Widmer. A hundred years ago, he said, 70 percent of Christians in the world lived in the West. Now, 70 percent live in what is called the South. “And the heart of this new demographic phenomenon is Africa,” said Widmer. In fact, two-thirds of WARC’s membership comes from Asia, Africa, and Central and South America.

Darrell Guder’s role at WARC was behind the scenes. He oversaw all the translation, printing, and simultaneous interpretation necessary at a meeting with delegates from many nations speaking many languages, a role he has played at WARC’s general councils since 1980. “I didn’t sit very much,” he said, laughingly.

“Once the meeting begins, it generates its own business”—to the tune of hundreds of pages of section reports, speeches, and addresses that need to be translated into German, Spanish, English, and French. Supervising a staff of 30 interpreters and translators, as well as six editors, itself “translated” into a “12-hour-a-day job,” said Guder.

One of those Guder supervised was PTS alum Eriberto Soto, who was invited to the council as a interpreter for the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking delegates who came from Guatemala, Costa Rica, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Bolivia. When he was not translating or interpreting, Soto visited and preached in two churches in Ashanti Presbytery, with 200 churches the largest presbytery in the country. Ghana is a former British colony and today, of its population of 20 million people, 65 percent are Christian. Of the Christian denominations in Ghana, the Presbyterians are the largest, including the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana. As a result, according to Soto, Presbyterians have a very strong influence in the country, having built many schools, hospitals, and clinics for the poorest segments of society.

Soto observed five characteristics of Ghanaian churches while he was in Accra: their enthusiasm for worship and witness (“There is a contagious vitality in their faith, expressed in singing, dancing, giving testimonies, offering their tithes”), their holistic vision of mission (“There are no false dichotomies between evangelism and compassion and justice”), the prominence of lay ministries (“Discipleship training is a great priority”), the role of young people (“Many Ghanaians in their twenties are in seminary and committed to lives of Christian service”), and their commitment to praying (“Prayer meetings during the week in churches and homes are a high priority”).

Soto experienced the Ghanaian “praying church” in a personal way. While he was at the WARC meeting his mother was undergoing surgery for a brain tumor. One of the young people in a church where Soto was preaching “promised that that same evening he with some other Christians would be praying for most of the night for my loved ones back in the United States.”

Guder’s career has taken him to South Africa and East Africa, but this was his first time in West Africa. He found it fascinating. “The hospitality was wonderful, the worship electric, as was the street life with all its vendors. The traffic was mind-boggling, and the obvious poverty in some neighborhoods was very sobering, especially when you live in Princeton. It was an intense experience.”

At the Accra council, General Secretary Nyomi emphasized the need for WARC and its member churches to continue to develop relations with other ecumenical organizations like the World Council of Churches, the Reformed Ecumenical Council, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Orthodox churches. Nyomi, who is a friend of Princeton Seminary president Iain Torrance, was in Princeton in March for Torrance’s inauguration, where he participated in a panel on interpreting scripture with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars. WARC, whose newly elected president Clifton Kirkpatrick is the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s General Assembly, will be at the forefront of such dialogue, believing that all the world’s religions can and must contribute to lessening the threats to all creatures and increasing the dignity and value of life. ■



Young Ghanians gambling in the marketplace



Two local women enjoy watching David Watermulder hold one of their babies.

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