World Wesleyan Leadership, I

by Bishop Festo Kivengere

Introduction of Bishop Kivengere
by President David L. McKenna

Family and friends, inauguration is a time for reaffirming our roots and taking wings into the future. Our campus conversation during this inaugural year has centered on our historic role and our future role in serving and representing World Wesleyan Leadership. The conversation continues today in the three inaugural lectures, “World Wesleyan Leadership.” We have chosen, as you see, three distinguished Christian statesmen who cannot only address the subject which they are given but who also, through their life work and ministry, demonstrate the meaning of the subject. Appropriately then, Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda comes to us to address the theme, “World.” World. With Bishop Kivengere that’s a view that he sees, a commission that he accepts, a message that he preaches, a spirit that he feels, and that is a life that he leads. The Bishop is a native of Uganda, married to Mera, a teacher, educated at the University of London and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; he is the leader of African Enterprise in East Africa and the founder of RETURN, an acronym which means our “Relief Education Training for Ugandan Refugees Now.” Ordained to the episcopacy in the Episcopal church and bishop of the church of Uganda, he is author of books that include I Love Idi Amin and Hope for Uganda and the World and his latest book entitled Revolutionary Love. Bishop Kivengere is the recipient of some of the highest awards that the world can give: the International Peace Prize from Oslo, Norway; the Edward Browning Achievement from the World Council of Churches for his work in spreading the Gospel, and most recently St. Augustine’s Cross from the Archbishop of Canterbury for his work in missions.
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Bishop Kivengere’s Lecture —
WORLD Wesleyan Leadership

Thank you very much for those beautiful words of introduction. For many years I have been wanting to come here, and I’ve never been able to until today. Thank you very much for welcoming me at the inauguration ceremonies; I bring you greetings from your Christian brothers and sisters in Uganda.

The World. My approach is from the New Testament, John 3:16: Here is the framework in which I feel at home to try to find the excitement for being in the world today. Many views of the world are very pessimistic and very frustrating. Good men with good minds have worked hard to give their views a particular center. Some have chosen man to be the center — humanism. Others have chosen economics as a center and others have made intellectualism their basic approach. The purpose of each of them is to give a general theme for what life is all about.

So the purpose of these good thinking people has been to find a common denominator which could give the world some sort of meaning, some sort of mosaic within which to work. We are made that way; we don’t enjoy nonsense, therefore we seek for sense and meaning.

The problem with these views of the world is that they tend to edge God from the platform and put on the platform other entities — man, intellectual abilities, economics, you name it. Of course these creaturely entities can never be great enough to give the whole world the kind of meaning or the kind of base it is seeking.

These views look like spinning tops with big heads and tiny bases; the tiny bases cannot support the weight of the heads. Ideologies fight among themselves. Each is jealous of the other. But what do they leave behind? Not the orderly world they each intended. They leave behind a disordered world full of shadows and their world becomes a little more chaotic as each view leaves the arena or is forced out.

Where is the solution? Where is the answer that can be reliable as a theme for living? The New Testament has the answer. God created the world and made sense out of it. If He is pushed out, what does it produce? It produces chaos, shadows, darkness, fear, and insecurity.

In my own country of Uganda we had a dictator. Many Ugandans thought when the dictator goes, Idi Amin, we shall be lovely people who love each other. Far from it. Amin went. The enemy of mankind...
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stayed. You really can’t get rid of that enemy of mankind by means of a gun. He needs a better remedy than a bullet.

“God so loved the world,” says John in reporting our Lord’s words, “that He gave His own beloved Son, so that whoever believes in that Son may never control himself but may have the kind of life which God alone can give.” That is the most profound world view you can have. God so loved the world which He had created, the world which had run mad, that He gave his only begotten Son; and in giving His Son, what did He do? He made it possible for people to put their confidence in Him. Those who do, then, have eternal life — the kind of life which is a match for the cares of the world. The kind of life which doesn’t succumb, which is able to cope — with Amin, with economics and exploitation, and with racial tensions. Love is the only view out of which the world can make sense. And what kind of love? Not just human sentimental love. But the kind of love which is demonstrated in giving or in self-giving. For God loved the world He made so that He gave His Son, and the Son’s self-giving went all the way to Calvary. And right on the cross some miracles began to take place.

In Africa, my country, an elderly lady who was illiterate was converted at the age of 65. She was too old to learn how to read. But she came into a tremendous experience of the Spirit of God and her spiritual eyes were opened when she saw the cross. This dear lady said repeatedly, “The devil fears nothing except the cross. Only the cross frightens the devil.” Then she explained it this way: “Because the cross introduces into my world something completely new: I used to hate, now I love. I used to back-bite, now I come and speak with a brother or a sister.” You think that is Sunday school stuff, but that is how the cross introduces a new view to the world. It demonstrates the power of God. The light from the cross is shed upon humanity, and then men and women begin to see in a completely new way. They used to see each other in categories of race, in categories of class, and as enemies. But these categories were smashed and broken on the cross. (Ephesians 2:14ff.) Hostilities are removed, estrangements are taken care of, and men and women in that experience are absolutely staggered at their discoveries.

Do you know that the cross not only breaks the walls of separation and alienation, but the cross actually is a pacesetter. Take a man, for example, like E. Stanley Jones, a good Methodist. I knew him. We preached together when he was 83. What a man! Something had
happened here at Asbury, and that man, because of what happened here in the power of the Holy Spirit, set the pace and ran across the subcontinent of India without fearing all the ideologies of that old country, presenting the simplest message about Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen. What a man! He had received a pacesetter. I hope you have.

What about the oldest Methodist, John Wesley? Also Anglican, and I'm very proud of that. This Anglican, with a lot of heavy tradition around him, in one little place in London found a group of brethren near St. Paul's Cathedral and you know the subsequent history. Something happened — he received his pacesetter. He lost all those heavy weights of tradition, ceremony, and original doctrine. Doctrine is good but it can also tie you down. So he received his pacesetter and his heart was absolutely overwhelmed with love, and he couldn't be stopped. The world changed. It was no longer a world of traditions, a world of only the British people, the Church of England with a lot of history; it became a world of people throbbing with need. Whether they were drunk or sober, whether they were on the streets or in beautiful homes, they all had one thing in common: they were redeemable; that became his theme, his brother's too, and hundreds of men and women with him, and Methodism grew into a beautiful experience. Wesleyanism or Methodism was never meant to be sat upon. I hope you will never sit on it. It is meant to be a fire of acceleration to take you into all sorts of places.

There's something very common in the world view of these people — E. Stanley Jones, John Wesley, and another man I'm going to add, St. Paul who became a Methodist before Methodism was born. He was a trained Pharisee, a graduate of Gamaliel's College in Jerusalem, a very tough believer in the Old Testament, a serious religious person. This man too received a pacesetter on the road to Damascus. The very thing he was opposed to, the very vision he hated and misunderstood became the turning point in his life. It was as if the Holy Spirit, in the power of the risen Lord, turned the key, and the heart of that man (which was almost frozen to death) was released from death. His experience was similar to Wesley's. A warmth invaded him, and when that took place, what happened to the eyes of this Jew whose world had been very, very conservative, very exclusive, very limited? It widened. He no longer saw people in categories; he saw men and women for whom Christ died.

I was in Cyprus preaching just before I came here. As you know,
Paul went through Cyprus with his heart burning in tune with the hearts of other believers, but above all in tune with the Lord Jesus, in tune with the Holy Spirit. Persecutions were there. They’re part of the game. You can’t really follow the Lamb without running into them, but when the time comes for them you have your Master there. He knows all about it. The world doesn’t change because of persecution. No, no, it remains a redeemable world. St. Paul experienced what Wesley experienced, what E. Stanley Jones experienced, what many of us in one way or another have experienced, because it is the experience of the Lord Himself.

So you see, there is a difference between the Gospel world view and those other world views. As you look at the world through the eyes of love you see the dimensions of redeeming love. Your vision is widened; your heart beats in tune with the heart of Jesus. When the Spirit of God visits a community that community can no longer be the same.

Love has a way of penetrating life and releasing it. I call this kind of experience divine retaliation. In Africa we are used to revenge and vengeance and killing — all negative, destructive retaliation. But when Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus He retaliated creatively. He didn’t kill Paul, a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye. No He did something completely different. Jesus retaliated in a way that set Paul free, and St. Paul became the most liberated man we’ve ever known.

How do you retaliate? How do you retaliate as a Christian? Do you retaliate creatively? I find that question a hard one. Being human like any other human being and yet born again as one who believes in Jesus — love taught me the way of liberation — not a tooth for a tooth or an eye for an eye; that ties you in knots, strangles your heart, grieves the Holy Spirit and blinds your eyes. The other way is not very human at all, and yet, in the end, the Spirit of God makes it the most humanizing way — that way is the way of repentance and forgiveness. These are very familiar words. In the world in which we live, the ordinary view is not to repent. Not at all. Nor is the view forgiveness. Not at all. It is retaliation. Answer back. Be quick. Get even.

God has been teaching us that the way to heal the wounds of Africa is for Christian brothers to kneel by the cross and ask the Holy Spirit to teach them how to repent of their hatred and how to forgive their enemies. That may sound almost childish, but it is the most profound
healing you can experience.

I have mentioned a liberated world, the centrality of the cross, giving men and women new eyes. I come from Uganda. You have read about Uganda very much. The Christian church in the West is suffering from some sort of spiritual anemia. It's illness is not atheism — it is apathy. Do you know that there are more doors open today in Uganda and elsewhere for Christian men and women using their skills and gifts than there have ever been in the history of that country? The minister of education for the government of Uganda has said to me, "Bishop Festo, can you make an appeal to Christian churches in Western Europe to send us 200 committed Christians to reestablish Christian standards of education in our government high schools?" That's the world, that is the redeemable world. Open doors are everywhere and they are open to you Wesleyans today. The cross will not permit you to push Wesleyanism too much. Just as it doesn't allow me to push Anglicanism too much. The only permission I have is to use my tradition as a bridge. Not as a barrier, but as a bridge, so that another person can cross over and I can cross over to him or her in Jesus Christ. But if I use it as a barrier to keep others apart, I am misusing the tradition. So let your tradition, the heritage which God has given, be that by which you see your Father's world, the redeemable world, ticking with expectation. Ask the Holy Spirit to set the pace. I'm sure you are going to find more and more young people — ministers, doctors, nurses — running around with the message of the King. In Africa a camp which is open today may be completely closed tomorrow. This happens all the time, so my challenge is, is your world really closed? Is your pace suitable to what is happening in your world?

Before I came here I went to visit 7,000 Ugandans, precious Ugandans, who did not do anything. You may call it fault or crime. Some fanatics in my country, obeying the devil, got into their houses, looted their crops, made them homeless. They've been sitting by the river for the last six months. They've been losing their little children at the rate of seven a day to measles. I've been there many times to see them. Others have come there. Food is needed. The government is trying to do its job diplomatically which is typical of governments, so don't blame Ugandan government. They all do that. Here is a big problem. These are your brothers. These are redeemable men and women for whom Christ died. I hope Asbury Seminary will always develop a tradition in which the Holy Spirit lifts you up so that your
young people can grow and minister.

Come and bless your old friends, the Anglicans. We love you. Come and bless all kinds of traditions, traditions which have become tired and stale. We need a new breed of missionaries. Men and women who are engineers and agriculturalists and water engineers, but who love Jesus. Who will go into the villages, and sow seeds, and at the same time say “I love Jesus.” How beautiful as they inspire their Christian brothers and sisters to work together. Opportunities are endless. Needs are vast, but the love of Christ is all-embracing, all-conquering, and all-loving. There are no people outside of the reach of Calvary’s cross.

In times of revival the Spirit of God opens the eyes of His people and they see people they didn’t see before, they love people they didn’t love before, they speak as never before, and they can sing praises to God. This is what the church desperately needs today. Recently I spoke to 700 young high school men and women for about 40 minutes. When I finished, hands went up and I thought they were asking questions about what I talked about. One young person said, “Is that all you have, Bishop?” I said, “What do you mean?” “We want more,” he responded. So I started again. People are hungry and want to hear more of Jesus. A redeemable world is at your disposal, brothers and sisters. May God bless you.