

Jabulani Africa! — Joy in the Church in Africa

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Abstract

This essay explores the meaning of joy and the underlying reasons undergirding its experience in the Church in Africa. It argues that part of God's mission in the world is for humans to experience the joy of the Triune God through relationships grounded on God's love. Insofar as the Church in Africa is concerned, some of the reasons undergirding the manifestation of joy include the hope that believers find in Jesus Christ, their participation in Christ's suffering, contentment amidst lack and poverty, the joy of having one's sin forgiven and the undeniable sense of eternal security in Christ, divine healing, deliverance from demonic powers, and life in community. The article further argues that joy should be considered as a missiological motif and posits that the promise which the Good News of Great Joy holds out for is the unshakable foundation of the joy in the Church in Africa.

Torches of Joy

During the last decade of the twentieth century, a French lady, Christine Commeau, was leading a youth group of a fledging church plant—Église Keur Jamm¹—in Dakar, Senegal. Christine and her colleagues named the group *Flambeaux de Joie* (FJ)—Torches of Joy. *Flambeaux de Joie* was composed of teenagers and young adults in Dakar, most of whom were members of the church, Église Keur Jamm. These youths exuded joy and showcased it through their songs, choreographies, and drama sketches. Some learned to play

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the guitar, a few the piano, and of course the traditional West African *djembe*. What was the underlying reason for the joy of these youths—many of whom lacked the basics of daily life? They often sang: *Bondissez de joie, louez le Seigneur* (Jump for joy, Praise the Lord). What was their secret for jumping for joy when some were uncertain if there would be *tchep djen*² for their next meal? These FJs (as we fondly called them) have been introduced to the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ)³ issuing from Christ's life through the Holy Spirit, whom they embraced through the gospel announced to them.

In the song by Exo which FJs often sang *Bondissez de joie, louez le Seigneur* (Jump for joy, Praise the Lord), they tell why they were jumping for joy and praising the Lord. It is that: *Son amour infini n'a pas de fin, et son règne éternel dure à jamais*—His (Jesus's) infinite love has no end, and his eternal reign endures forever (Ps. 136; Isa. 9:7; Dan. 2:44). The picture that FJs and their leader, Christine, painted in my mind during my years in Dakar portrays what is often the case in the Church in Africa. The in-breaking of the Kingdom of God through the Gospel introduces a dynamic of joy absent in peoples' lives before they experience the Father's love manifested in Christ Jesus and made experiential through the Holy Spirit's work.

A part of God's mission in the world is to grant humans to participate in the joy found in the triune God through relationships grounded on God's love. In his work, *Theology and Joy*, the principal question Jürgen Moltmann sought to find answers to was: “how can we laugh, how can we rejoice without care, when we are worried, depressed and tortured by the state of the world in which we live? [Or] How can we laugh and rejoice where there are still so many tears to be wiped away and when new tears are being added every day?”⁴ In regard to Africa, Moltmann poses the same question differently. “How can one laugh and play when children are starving in Africa?”⁵ We rephrase Moltmann's question and seek answers to, not the “how can we...?” but, to: *What* are the grounds for joy in the Church in Africa in the midst of pain, suffering, lean economic means, oppression, injustice and widespread poor health services? What is it that generates joy, where its echoes are heard and felt in the Church in Africa? On the missiological side, how can joy as a motif serve as a propelling factor for joining God in his mission in the world? We reflect on the contours of the mission of God in bringing His joy to many Africans who have joyfully embraced and embody the

unmediated love made manifest through the Gospel—the Good News of Great Joy fleshed out in God’s incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, and made experiential through the Holy Spirit who births joy.

Prior to engaging the above questions, it is essential to underscore the fact that joy in the Church in Africa is undeniable. The joy which the gospel of Jesus begets in the hearts and communities of Africans where Jesus’s message has been embraced did not begin during what Scott Sunquist calls “*The Unexpected Christian Century*”.⁶ The joy that the Good News of Jesus produces in Jesus communities of faith in Africa can be traced back to early African followers of Jesus. The encounter between the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip on the road to Gaza affirms this claim. After the African eunuch had been baptized, Luke recorded the following words: “And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and *the eunuch* saw him no more, and *went on his way rejoicing*”⁷ (Acts 8:39. Emphasis in italics is mine). The eunuch returned to Africa with joy, evidently engendered by his embrace of the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ) which Philip announced to him. Exegetically, “*rejoicing*” in the original Greek text is a present active participle form—*χαίρων chairōn*—which conveys the notion of a continuing contemporaneous action. That is, while the eunuch was on his way travelling back to Africa, he went on rejoicing. Joy became his companion. Secondly, “*rejoicing*” in the text evidently indicates the outcome or result of the action of baptism—which in turn is an action through which the African eunuch identified himself with Jesus and declared his embrace of the Good News of Great Joy. Those who personally experience Jesus know what is often referred to as the “joy of salvation” (Ps. 51:12). As the eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” after his baptism, so also many followers of Jesus in Africa. One may then exclaim: How contagious this joy, which the eunuch carried from the Gaza Road back to Africa! Its echoes continue to be heard wherever Jesus and his message are embraced in Africa. But what is this joy?

What is Joy by the way?

To respond to the question, what is joy, we also pose a related question: Is there a difference in nuance between joy and happiness? In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, joy is included in the fruit bunch of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5: 22). He further notes that “...the

kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). The Thessalonian followers of Jesus received the word of God in the midst of affliction “with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6).

Jürgen Moltmann, in a contribution to a volume on *Joy and Human Flourishing*, writes: “Joy is the power to live, to love, to have creative initiative. Joy awakens all our senses, energizing mind and body”.⁸ In a recording sounding answers from some scholars to the question “What is Joy?”, systematic theologian, Ellen T. Charry, defines joy as that “sense of contentment with the choices that one makes and the paths that one pursues and declines to pursue”.⁹ Another systematic theologian, Willie Jennings, looks at “joy as an act of resistance against despairing forces, all the forces of despair” (ibid., 1:08–1:16). Robert A. Emmons, a Psychology scholar, maintains that “the key essence behind joy is that it is about connection. It is about connection with something that is beyond ourselves, whether it is a relationship with another person, a relationship with a supernatural being, or some connection to something which is beyond ourselves. So it has to have an element of transcendence to it” (ibid., 2:04–2:25). University of Hong Kong musicologist, Daniel Chua, speaking from a Christian perspective maintains that “joy is fundamentally about relationship with God. It has to be rooted in that relationship... Joy has to be rooted in love, in faith and in hope” (ibid., 2:25–2:37; 4:33).

From the reflections provided by these scholars we deduce that joy is spiritual. In essence, its source is the Holy Spirit. Joy neither springs from owned material possessions nor from held worldly positions. It is not the product of worldly accomplishments—degrees obtained, awards, medals, and political positions won, or landmarks attained in the pursuit of earthly ambitions and aspirations. Physical circumstances are not necessary determinants for joy. The latter is not necessarily a product of the former. This is where the basic difference between joy and happiness lies. Happiness may be tied to owned worldly possessions and positions. Whereas, happiness is often anchored on favorable circumstances—such as possessions acquired, positions attained, human victories won, et cetera, joy on the contrary goes beyond physical circumstances. Suffering, pain, and or death do not extricate joy where it is found. But happiness, as opposed to joy, pales and withers in the face of suffering, loss, pain or death. As Emmons rightly observed, joy is tied to a relationship “with a supernatural

being”—God. Chua echoes the same thought tying joy to a relationship with God and rooted in love, faith and hope. In her award winning volume, Evelyne Reisacher—until her passing to glory, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Intercultural Relations at Fuller Theological Seminary—underscores the connection between joy and relationship with God. She affirms that joy cannot be faked “like artists who artificially display emotions with the theatrical masks.” She insists that on the contrary, “God’s joy is no gimmick! It flows from a vibrant relationship with [God], the source of joy-filled life and witness.”¹⁰

Reisacher also rightly observes that “joy and suffering are not antagonistic but, like a fabric, form the warp and woof of a beautiful tapestry” (ibid.). The existence of injustice, oppression, pain, poverty, suffering, and violence in many African countries is undeniable. According to a report released in February 2017 by Global Finance,¹¹ for example, Africa dominates the top list of the world’s poorest countries. Civil war, deplorable economy, poor governance, exploitation of both natural and human resources by some world super-powers constitute part of the challenges many African countries grapple with. In the midst of all that, the Church in Africa continues to grow. Many Africans live in the midst of these painful and deplorable situations, yet they do not despair of life. Rather they display resilience “against despairing forces, all the forces of despair”¹², in the words of Willie Jennings. Hope keeps them alive, especially those who identify with the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ). Why is this so? This is the question we now seek to find answers.

Grounds for Joy in the Church in Africa

In a survey¹³, I asked African followers of Jesus to share their thoughts and insights in regard to the question: What are the grounds for joy in the Church in Africa in the midst of pain, suffering, poverty, oppression, injustice and widespread poor health services? What is it that generates this joy, where its echoes are heard and felt in the African Church?

With their informed consent¹⁴ to the survey, I outline here some reflections on a few of the responses. Methodologically, responses were collated and relevant themes extracted. The responses received were as fascinating as they were enlightening. Here are the major themes some African followers of Jesus identify as the source of the joy in the Church in Africa.

Hope

Hope, as a theme, was dominant in the responses received. Nosa Edokpolo-Tukura, a Nigerian physicist, writes in response to our question:

We [African followers of Jesus] are a very hopeful people. I guess that's why we often say "It is well" when everything around us doesn't look or seem well. We are very optimistic and believe in God's supernatural intervention. We have either experienced His intervention in the past or heard of someone who did. In our African worldview, the natural and supernatural are very closely intertwined. So the belief that God will intervene brings us hope and joy.

What does Nosa mean by "that's why we often say It is well"? The context of this expression (which some African followers of Jesus use in the midst of their pains, sufferings, trials and challenges) comes primarily from the response the woman of Shunem gave to Elisha's servant (Gehazi) in 2 Kings 4:26, and secondarily from the refrain of the hymn, "It is well with my Soul." We focus here on the primary—the woman of Shunem's response to Elisha's servant—because that is essentially what the majority of African followers of Jesus are familiar with. Many African followers of Jesus do not know the historical narrative¹⁵ that inspired Horatio G. Spafford to pen the words of the hymn: "It is well with my soul", hence, it is unnecessary to delve into it here.

The woman of Shunem and her husband had been childless, but in accordance with the word that Elisha pronounced, she conceived and had a son. Some years later, tragedy struck one afternoon and the young lad died. The woman laid her son's corpse on the bed in their guest room where Elisha use to stay whenever he comes. She then went to her husband and said: "Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again. And [the husband] said, 'Why will you go to him today? It is neither the new moon nor Sabbath'" (v.22-23). To this question the Shunammite answered: שָׁלוֹם—*shalom*—"All is well." She saddled the donkey and rode to Mount Carmel to meet Elisha, who saw her from afar and sent his servant, Gehazi, saying: "Run at once to meet her and say to her, 'Is it well with you? Is all well with your husband? Is all well with the child?'" (v.26). The woman's response to the triad question was again: שָׁלוֹם—*shalom*—"It is well" (v.26. KJV).

But, how can it be well when you have been childless, your husband is old and the only son that came following a word from a servant of God now lie dead on a bed back at home? What hope is there? For the woman of Shunem, “It is well”. It is שלום—*shalom* (the Hebrew word English Bible translations rendered as “It is well” (KJV) or “All is well” (ESV)).¹⁶ The reason behind proclaiming '*shalom*' in the context of loss, is the hope resident in the promises of God’s word. It is in this framework and context that Nosa asserts “we [African followers of Jesus] often say 'It is well' when everything around us doesn't look or seem well...So the belief that God will intervene brings us hope and joy.”

This is further buttressed by another response provided by Folaranmi Chinyere. Folaranmi was married for twenty-two years and unexpectedly her husband died leaving her with three children. She observes that faith “in the word of God... keeps rekindling our hope because it [God’s word] has never failed us. His words manifest in our lives in various ways that comfort and give joy.” It is pertinent to note that these are the words of a widow raising her three children single-handedly in the context of an excruciating economy and life-threatening circumstances in her country. She insists that the grounds for joy “borders on hope that tomorrow will be greater” and what makes this possible is faith in God’s words which serves as the carburant for hope and joy. Joy born out of hope is grounded on faith in God’s promises (God’s word) which cannot fail. Thus, faith in God’s promises, hope and joy, therefore, form a triad to which African followers of Jesus hold.

Byke Freedom, a Nigerian humanitarian worker, shares Nosa’s and Folaranmi’s opinion asserting that “hope is one of the pivot of joy in [the] African church amidst all uncertainties.” In his understanding, “the hope that faith in Christ will bring a victorious end, is a thing of joy...we just hope, keep the faith and look forth to the day when all needs become provision.” A Nigerian doctoral student at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore Kentucky, Chinyereugo Chiagorom Adeliyi, reacting to Nosa’s response asked: “In essence, is it that our joy is tied to what God will do to meet our felt needs?” Nosa responds: “Yes it is partly so. But there is a part of us that will hold on to hope even when those needs are not met.”

Doyin Emmanuel—a doctoral candidate at Tufts University’s Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Boston, Massachusetts—ties the theme of dependence on God

to hope and joy. She references a message that Greg Hills—Lead Pastor at First Presbyterian Church Northshore in Ipswich, Massachusetts—preached on October 1, 2017. According to Doyin, “Pastor Greg Hills...highlighted hopelessness as one of the things that rob people of their joy in the Lord. He said hopelessness sets in when one feels alienated, forsaken, forgotten and helpless.”¹⁷ Comparing her almost a decade of living in North America with her African experience, Doyin goes further to add:

In the West, this feeling [of hopelessness] leads people to seek for solution in the human judicial system, philosophy, psychology, medicine and so on, which though not bad in themselves, are tainted with human imperfections, and so the sense of hopelessness remains, even in the midst of affluence. In Africa by contrast, ...these institutions are not well developed, and where they are, they are not very functional. And so, whenever we find ourselves in very desperate situations, which is very often [the case], our only recourse is God. Is this not why the Bible says that the poor of this world are rich in faith[?]. So, our desperation drives us to God. He is not one choice among many, but the Only One we have and He always comes through! He proves Himself over and over again that He is more than enough, and the end result, is this joy unspeakable that marks the African Church. Though born out of the crucible of suffering and hopelessness, faith in Christ gives us a living hope!¹⁸

Hope, as a theme, is a preponderant reason for joy in the midst of deprivation, oppression, pain, and suffering in the Church in Africa. Doyin’s phrase “though born out of the crucible of suffering”¹⁹ leads us to the next element of joy in the Church in Africa—participation in Christ’s suffering.

Participating in Christ’s Suffering

Participation in Christ’s suffering is another theme that emerged. Sublime Mabilia—a Congolese doctoral student at the University of Edinburgh—posits that “the joy of African Christians is generated by their ability to participate in Christ’s sufferings.” Adeliyi agrees with Mabilia asserting that Christ’s suffering is “the source of any real joy.”

Distinguished missiologist and historian, Scott W. Sunquist, has much to say on this theme of participating in Christ’s suffering, although not as it pertains to joy, but more in regard to the transient reality that mission has, which makes participating in the suffering of Christ a component of mission. In his landmark volume, *Understanding Christian Mission*, Sunquist works with the thesis that “*Mission is from the heart of God, to each context, and it*

is carried out in suffering in this world for God's eternal glory"²⁰. He posits "that God's mission is enacted through temporary suffering and humiliation for God's eternal glory."²¹ Sunquist's argument is corroborated with witnesses in the Scriptures and in history. But is 'participation in Christ's suffering' only for God's eternal glory? Is there no co-relation as well between participating in Christ's suffering and joy? To say the least and in the context of the Church in Africa, we argue that there exists a relationship between participation with Christ in his sufferings and joy, besides the eternal glory that such participation brings to God. On God's own part, participation in Christ's suffering engenders eternal glory to God, whereas, on the part of human participants in Christ's suffering, it births joy on this side of eternity as well as on eternity's other shore.

Sunquist devotes an entire chapter in his volume on the work of the Holy Spirit in mission.²² He cites Paul's words to the Thessalonians, who received the message that was announced to them "in the midst of severe suffering with joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1Thess. 1:6 NIV).²³ "[J]oy given by the Holy Spirit" was birthed irrespective of much affliction. As noted earlier, joy is spiritual and it is the brainchild of the Holy Spirit, whose fruit include love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-13). Physical affliction or suffering does not strip followers of Jesus off the joy which the Holy Spirit produces in their lives. Thus, we posit that participating in Christ suffering, as Mabiala and Adeliyi opined, is also a persuasive ground upon which joy in the Church in African springs.

Another reason why sharing in the suffering of Christ engenders joy is the tie it has with the hope of sharing in Jesus's resurrection. Sharing in Christ's suffering implies sharing in his resurrection in the eschaton. Paul in his letter to the Philippians repeatedly made reference to joy and rejoicing, even though he was writing from prison. He wanted to "know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share [Christ's] sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [so] that by any means possible [he, Paul] may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3: 10-11). Jesus Christ himself, endured the suffering on the cross in view of the joy that was set before him (Heb. 12:2).

All through church history, we read of the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, and who in the face of being fed to wild beasts and flames, radiated joy produced in their

hearts by the Holy Spirit. The thought of joining their Lord in his glory, who himself traveled the same road and left an example for them to follow (1Pet. 2:21), multiplied their joy. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, in his letter to followers of Jesus in Rome while on his way to his martyrdom, pleaded with the latter “not to do [him] unreasonable kindness. Let me [Ignatius insisted] be fodder for wild beasts—that is how I can get to God. I am God’s wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ.”²⁴ It was customary for followers of Jesus “to gather together in joy and gladness to celebrate the day of [Polycarp’s, Bishop of Smyrna who was burned alive] martyrdom as a birthday, in memory of those athletes who have gone before, and to train and make ready those who are to come hereafter.”²⁵ The theme of celebrating with joy and gladness the memory of those who were martyred on the grounds of their faith in Jesus resonates with participation in Christ’s suffering. Out of ashes, God brings forth joy and oil of gladness. Thus, we maintain that out of our participation in Christ’s suffering, God is not only glorified, but in addition joy emerges for participants in Christ’s suffering. This is not different for followers of Jesus in Africa. As they participate with Christ in his suffering, the Holy Spirit brings to birth joy in such situations of affliction, of pain and suffering. Besides hope and participation in Christ’s suffering, contentment is another element of joy.

Contentment

Elizabeth Lamptey, a medical doctor living with her Ghanaian spouse in northwest of Africa, thinks that “freedom from fear of loss is one reason” that births joy. She observes that “life is more joyful when you have little or nothing to grab.” On the contrary, when one pursues and becomes attached to the possessions of this world, then the fear of losing those possessions robs the person of joy. Lamptey adds: “If you can live on one dollar a day, [then] two dollars become a blessing.” Amidst lack, pain, suffering in many African countries, people learn to live joyfully despite their circumstances. An apt illustration from the two following stories drives home this argument.

During the summer of 2012, a group of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary students went to Malawi for their Overseas Mission Practicum (OMP). On their return, they gave reports of their visit during one of the chapel services to the seminary community. One

of the students shared a picture he or she captured while in a village in Malawi. It was the picture of a little girl wearing a tattered dress and standing in front of a mud-built hut. The background and surroundings in the picture depicted poverty and lack. But what marked the student who took the picture was the striking and contrasting smile of joy and contentment that beamed from the face of that girl. The student noted how he or she was so deeply touched that this girl was so full of joy and was contented with life amidst such a context of poverty. The image painted here is something you will find ubiquitous in many African villages, especially where the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ) has been proclaimed and received.

A similar scenario is painted in the story of Nombulelo Labelle of Dunoon in South Africa. On Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020, Pastor William Marais of Joshua Generation Church, Dunoon, preached a message. In his message he shared a short video clip of a woman [Nombulelo Labelle] with three daughters and one grandchild living in one-room space. Within that one room space is a bed, a double bunk, a section she arranged to serve as her kitchen, a table with a book shelf that serves as her study. She showed how she and her daughters take their bath with a plastic basin inside the same room space. Nombulelo showed her lounge where she said they “chill.” In her own words, she said: “As small as it is, it is actually big. I can invite people here. Ladies from church, they dwell here, we worship here, we pray in this house, and we have fellowship together. It's so cool. We thank God for this house.”²⁶ What Nombulelo calls a house is indeed a room. The striking aspect pertains to the aura of contentment that emanated from Nombulelo. Such contentment is an evidence that support our thesis.

Hope, participation in Christ’s suffering, and contentment aren’t the only elements of joy in the Church in Africa. Associated with it is also the assurance of receiving the forgiveness of one’s sins, and of a secured eternity in Christ.

Joy associated with the salvation of souls

According to a bi-vocational minister in Ughelli, Nigeria, Eshemogie Christian Okhumode, another reason for joy in the Church in Africa is “the joy associated with the salvation of souls.” Eshemogie posits “that despite the hash situation in the land souls are still

being saved...and the joy associated with this salvation of souls cannot be suppressed by the situation in the land.” Re-echoing the theme of hope he adds: “We are hopeful people and we know that times as this will come and go just as we saw in different accounts in the Scriptures... In all, God's move in the church is not subject to the present situation in the land hence the church experiences joy unspeakable.” Eshemogie ties this joy to the sense of forgiveness of sins we receive through faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 9:6) and to Paul’s exhortation 'to rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation and be constant in prayer' (Rom. 12:12).

During the Fall of 2017, Protestant Christians worldwide marked half a millennium of the Reformation. In a journal article evaluating the statistical trends over these five hundred years of Protestant Christianity, missio-metric experts at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity where Professor Todd M. Johnson directs their research state that “African Protestants were only 1.7 percent of all Protestants in 1900—and these mostly Europeans in South Africa—but in 2017 they represent 40.8 percent of the global total and are projected to reach 53.1 percent by 2050. That is, sometime around 2040 half of all Protestants will live in Africa.”²⁷ The study further states that as at 2017, “Africa is home to four out of every Protestants... [and this] growth exploded in much of Africa during the twentieth century.”²⁸ Furthermore, in a cartographic illustration showing the increase and decrease in Christianity as a percentage of population between 1970 and 2015, CartoMission, drawing data from the *World Christian Database* and the research done at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, shows that out of twenty countries in the entire globe “with the largest increase in Christian percentage between 1970 and 2015, ten were in Africa.”²⁹

The demographic change being experienced in the Church in Africa, cannot be disassociated from the salvation of souls which remains a growing trend leading to an increase in the number of followers of Jesus.³⁰ It is projected that this trend will continue. The joy of salvation that those who receive and embrace the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ) in Africa remains, therefore, one of the elements that birth joy in the Church in Africa. Directly related to this element is also the assurance of eternal security which Christ promises his followers (John 14:1-3).

Divine Healing, Deliverance from Demonic Powers and Miracles

Another element very closely related to the joy of salvation, is divine healing, deliverance from demonic powers and miracles. South African missionary and geologist, Matthew Brayshaw, uses his gifts and training serving in remote places in Tanzania and Southern African countries. From his experiences in mission, Brayshaw asserts that he has “often seen people in Africa break down in tears when they experience physical healing, as they are actually experiencing the love and kindness of a GOOD Father! Often people witnessing the healing are in tears, and I [Matthew] am often one of those! This confident expectation of healing is a great contribution to the joy in the Church in Africa.”³¹

Brayshaw recounts one example he experienced while serving in Tanzania.

I remember in Tanzania a girl who used to sit outside the church and scratch herself with stones and make animal sounds. She never washed herself and no []one could, and her parents thought she was mad. We rebuked unclean spirits out of her and she was completely healed and could speak normally. She washed herself and the following Sunday she was in the front row in church in a new dress. There was so much joy!³²

Many more stories of divine healing, and deliverance from demonic powers can be told. Dondo Iorlamen,³³ narrates one in regard to his sister, Wuese-Ter, a young Tiv woman, who was believed to have been poisoned by the family of her prospective suitor. Wuese-Ter’s health deteriorated and quickly became complex with added depression. After consultations with doctors to no avail, Wuese-Ter’s mother, Mrs. Shaahu, decided to summon her siblings and family to a time of prayer. Dondo narrates:

All our siblings gathered and prayed. We felt God has heard our prayers and left to our respective destinations. [After their day of prayer] Wuese-Ter decided to follow us [Dondo and his own family] home. The first night we passed the night with little challenge. The second night, something happened. I [Dondo] woke up by 1:00 AM to use the restroom. When I laid down I heard a sound like a gun shot on my window. The shot sounded like a bomb that blew my whole house and wrecked it. The sound ... woke me from my sleep. I thought all of us in the house have perished with the attack. I regained consciousness and began to call on Jesus till I was fully restored. I quickly jumped down my bed and went to check on the children. All were safe and sound asleep. I went back to my room and continued to pray. By morning Wuese-Ter came out of her room. Her face changed and became radiant and full of smiles. We shouted “Wuese-Ter is delivered!! This is a subject of joy to us and the whole family. Wuese-Ter is now okay and has gone back to work. Praise the Lord.”³⁴

Space restrains us to narrate many more stories of divine healing, of deliverance from unseen evil powers and of miracles from the mission fields where African followers of Jesus have engaged in spiritual warfare with demonic powers. Many of such stories are yet to be told. But one thing is common to them all—the joy resulting from such experiences. Divine healing, deliverance from demonic powers and miracles is an undeniable ground with which the Holy Spirit births joy in the Church in Africa. Yet another motif is life in community.

Life in Community

Nnamdi Ezeji, a Nigerian entrepreneur, posits that for many African followers of Jesus, “[t]he church creates an atmosphere of communality in which people are free to express and deal with their fears just the way they imagined it.” Brayshaw from South Africa pointed also to life in community as one of the beacons that produce joy in the Church in Africa. In accord with Ezeji, Brayshaw asserts that “community life seems to come more naturally as it is still an active part of most African sub-cultures and is easily accommodated in the African church, i.e., individualism (often so prevalent in the West) is not so much of a problem.” Taking up Brayshaw’s comparison between Africa and the West, one is inclined to highlight that whereas most of Euro-North American philosophy seem to be shaped around René Descartes's epistemology of “I think therefore I am”, the African philosophy is on the other hand framed around “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”³⁵ This is often referred to as the philosophy of *ubuntu*. It is prevalent in many African cultures and manifest in many forms even outside Jesus's communities of faith. It is identified as one of the grounds that birth joy in the Church in Africa. The “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” philosophy is Africa’s equivalent epistemology to René Descartes's epistemology of “I think therefore I am.”

The importance of life in community is expressed in many African proverbs and lived out daily. The philosophy of *ubuntu* is one of them. It is found in Southern and Eastern African countries. The word *ubuntu* comes from Bantu languages in sub-Saharan Africa, mainly from Zulu and Xhosa languages. It is grounded on “the account of God’s creation, in which human identity is defined in the [*imago Dei*] image of God”³⁶, and not by religious or political affiliation, nor by race or ethnicity. The Chamba people of Northwest Region of

Cameroon, have this saying: The man who says he is rich and everyone around him is poor, is a poor man.³⁷ In Chichewa language spoken mainly in Malawi and some parts of Zimbabwe, *umunthu* is used and it means: to be human is to live for each other. The Chichewa people hold that caring for one another is an obligation because we are all interconnected like a spider's web, and what happens to one person affects all of us.³⁸ The Igbos in southeastern Nigeria have a dictum, which doubles as a given-name to male children: *Umunna bu ike*—literally meaning “father's children [as a unit] is power, strength or force.” In Igbo language that dictum possesses a proverbial meaning that alludes to the power and force of community working together as children of one father.

Nobel Peace laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu summarizes the principle of *ubuntu* saying: “A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”³⁹

This principle, ingrained in many African cultures, becomes fortified and lived out in many Jesus's communities of faith where they have not abandoned this concept and have rejected the “I think, therefore, I am” model imported into some African churches.⁴⁰

In the software world, developers of the operating system for the Linux computers baptized it 'Ubuntu' asserting in their *Ubuntu Code of Conduct V.2* that they “want a productive, happy and agile community that can welcome new ideas in a complex field, improve every process every year, and foster collaboration between groups with very different needs, interests and skills.”⁴¹ These software developers take cognizance of the importance of “productive, happy, and agile community” even in the computer world. They maintain that “[t]he Ubuntu operating system brings the spirit of Ubuntu to the world of computers.”⁴² Whereas, on one hand, “a happy...community” may be the product of collaboration in Ubuntu computer software, joy, on the other hand, is the product of collaboration and life in community lived in recognition of the contribution of ‘the other’ under the working of Holy Spirit, who indeed, is the One who births joy in the hearts of Jesus's followers.

The principle of life in community and the joy the Holy Spirit births through it has its origin in the Trinity—where God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and God the Holy Spirit league themselves in *perichoresis* (mutual inter-penetration or dance of the trinity). Life in community does not mean loss of one’s identity as an individual. Alister E. McGrath underscores this point in his explication of *perichoresis* asserting that, “[t]he concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of ‘a community of being,’ in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.”⁴³

This is what the African philosophy of *ubuntu* is about. It births joy in community, as Matthew Brayshaw concludes in his contribution to our survey asserting that God made us humans to live in “community and [that] there is certainly a sense of joy we derive from being part of a close-knit family of brothers and sisters in Christ.”

We have outlined above the broad strokes of the grounds that birth joy in the Church in Africa. Before we conclude this essay, a look at joy as motif for participating with the triune missionary God in the *missio Dei* is deemed fitting.

Joy as motif for Mission

Paul and his missionary colleagues, Silas and Timothy, preached the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ) in Thessalonica, but they were forced to leave the city following an uproar that the Jews orchestrated and an attack on the house of their Thessalonian host, Jason, (Acts 17:1-10). Irrespective of this forced departure from Thessalonica, a church was born in the city—the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia at that time. In view of Paul’s premature departure from Thessalonica and his concern for the believers, he sent Timothy back to the city after a short while to inquire about the state of the fledging church amidst the persecution the Thessalonian believers faced. (1Thess. 3:1-3). Paul and his colleagues eagerly desired to return to Thessalonica but he asserts: “Satan hindered us” (1Thess. 2:18). In the face of such opposition, Paul rhetorically asked “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” (1Thess. 2:19). This rhetorical question⁴⁴ Paul posed, he answers in verse 20, “For you are our glory and joy.”

Despite the hindrances which Paul attributes to Satan (whatever those hindrances were), he eagerly desired to be with the Thessalonian believers, of whom Paul compared his relationship with them to that “of a father with his children” (1Thess. 2:11), and “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (v 7). Paul considered the fruit of his missionary labors, that is: the redeemed souls who believed in the GNGJ he proclaimed to be the grounds for his joy, crown, and glory. He attaches an eschatological dimension to that joy and glory by his mention of “our Lord Jesus at his coming.”

Similarly, such eschatological joy, hope, glory, and crown can serve as motivation for followers of Jesus to participate with the triune God in his mission in the world. In such participation, obstacles and suffering may abound, but setting one’s heart on the joy that will emerge at the end will provide an “incentive to keep working in order to attain the glory that is to come.”⁴⁵ It is an irrefutable fact that those who participate in God’s mission will, more often than not, encounter obstacles, persecution, opposition, and (certainly) Satan’s rage. Why would one, knowing that these would come, still plunge oneself into such endeavor? It is the joy that follows participation in Christ’s suffering, and the eschatological joy, hope, crown, and glory at Christ’s second advent. Jesus, our model *par excellence*, did not shrink in the face of the cross. Instead, because of “the joy that was set before him, [he] endured” it (Heb. 12:2). Jesus’s followers should reckon it as an honor and a spring of great joy to participate with Jesus in His suffering (Matt. 5:11-12; Acts 5:40-41; 1Pet. 4:13-14), for in so doing occasions for joy multiply, not only for the individual participant but also for the community of God’s people—the community of God’s people in heaven and on earth. Evelyne Reisacher outlines some “examples [that] remind us that joy in ministry does not result from names checked off on a conversion list, or winning the battle over souls between Muslims and Christians, but from sharing the joy that flows from God.”⁴⁶

It must be noted that the joy which participation in God’s mission brings is not an individualized joy. On the contrary, it becomes also the joy of the entire community of God’s people, and indeed, the joy of God’s entire Kingdom. Jesus, in his parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, points out the common theme of “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7,10,22-24). The repentance of one sinner on earth calls for celebration in heaven. So, the joy of mission and its fruit is not only for the human

participant, but also for all those “in heaven” including God’s angelic messengers. After Paul, Barnabas, and some others were appointed and sent to go to Jerusalem to discuss the question of whether or not circumcision and keeping the law of Moses should be imposed upon non-Jewish followers of Jesus, “they [Paul and his colleagues] passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and [their report] brought great joy to all the brothers [and sisters]” (Acts 15:3). The joy resulting from the missionary labors of Paul and his colleagues became also the joy of all the brothers and sisters who heard what the Holy Spirit has done in the lives of people through the proclamation of the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ). It is in view of the foregoing argument we posit that joy should become a motif of mission, *inter alia*, in 21st century missiological enterprise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we recall Jürgen Moltmann’s question: “How can one laugh and play when children are starving in Africa?”⁴⁷ We tweaked this question and sought answers to, not the “how can we...?” but to: *What* are the grounds for joy in the Church in Africa? Where echoes of joy are heard and felt in the Church in Africa; from the Ethiopian eunuch who received the Good News of Great Joy (GNGJ) on the Gaza Road to the youths of *Flambeaux de Joie* (Torches of Joy) at *Église Keur Jamm* in Dakar who often jumped for joy; we affirm that the grounds for joy in the Church in Africa are rooted in the Gospel wherein we find hope, participation in Christ’s suffering, contentment, joy associated with the salvation of souls, divine healing, deliverance from demonic powers, miracles, and the propensity of life in community. These are made possible by the Good News of Great Joy—the gospel—implicitly grounded on the death of Jesus on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension, His lordship, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately Jesus’s Second Advent with all its eschatological implications. The promise that the Good News of Great Joy holds out is the unshakable foundation of the joy in the Church in Africa. This conclusion aligns with N. T. Wright’s argument that the reason behind Jesus’s disciples returning to Jerusalem “with great joy” even though their Master (Jesus) was physically taken away from them (Luke 24:50-53) rested on a foundation that “no trouble or sorrow can

shake. [They] returned to Jerusalem after the ascension full of joy because...they believed not only that Jesus had been raised from the dead, launching God's new creation, but that he was now enthroned as the world's rightful sovereign."⁴⁸

Missiologically, we also argued that joy, as a motif, should serve as a propelling incentive for participating with God in His mission in the world. The examples we advanced above support the thesis that part of God's mission in the world is for humans to experience the joy of the triune God through relationships grounded on God's love, and that the promise that the Good News of Great Joy brings is the basis of the joy in the Church in Africa. Those who participate with the triune God in this mission, not only participate in the ensuing joy, but also create occasions for others and the entire family of God's creation to share in that joy. Given the arguments put forth, we can join the triune God in bringing his joy to people wherever God places us in our respective geophysical locations as we sing with Lionel Peterson "*Jabulani Africa*" because the Lord, our God, has risen upon us.

Dedication:

This article is dedicated to Dr. Evelyne A. Reisacher who passed on to glory in March 2019 following a long battle with cancer. Dr. Reisacher was my doctoral mentor at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

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¹ "Église Keur Jamm" is a joint-church plant of workers who served with Youth with A Mission (YWAM) and Calvary Ministries (CAPRO). "Keur Jamm" is a Wollof name meaning, "House of Peace."

² *Tchep Djen* is a Senegalese staple prepared principally with rice and fish.

³ This acronym (GNGJ – Good News of Great Joy) was coined by my former doctoral mentor, the late Dr. Evelyne Reisacher, in a message she preached during the Fuller Seminary Baccalaureate Service in June 2016.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1973), 26,27.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “Christianity: A Religion of Joy,” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 1, http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/moltmann_christianity_a_religion_of_joy.pdf (Accessed: Aug. 7, 2017).

⁶ Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900-2000* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁸ Moltmann, “Christianity: A Religion of Joy,” 2.

⁹ Yale Center for Faith and Culture, *What Is Joy?*, 2014, 0:59-1:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=81&v=4YjiJwUwMgA (Accessed: October 3, 2017).

¹⁰ Evelyne A. Reisacher, *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World: Sharing the Gospel in Everyday Encounters, Mission in Global Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 19. Professor Reisacher further explores the neuroscientific connection of joy and human relationships grounded on attachment theory. See Chapter 2, pp. 25-29.

¹¹ Jonathan Gregson and Edith Updike. 2017. “The Poorest Countries in the World” in *Global Finance: Global Data*. <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/the-poorest-countries-in-the-world?page=12> (Accessed: October 3, 2017).

¹² Yale Center for Faith and Culture, *What Is Joy?*, 1:08–1:16.

¹³ The survey was conducted using social media, Facebook and WhatsApp.

¹⁴ Names of survey participants used here are their social media names. Most of the names are their legal names, but some are their surnames.

¹⁵ Horatio G. Spafford wrote the words of the hymn “It is Well with my Soul” in 1873 and Philip Paul Bliss composed its music. The story underlying Spafford's inspiration of the words of this hymn is very striking. See <https://www.spaffordhymn.com/horatio-spafford>, <http://www.sdretire.com/blogs/the-story-behind-the-hymn-it-is-well-with-my-soul/>, and <https://www.thetabernaclechoir.org/articles/it-is-well-with-my-soul.html> (Accessed: June 10, 2020).

¹⁶ Other renderings of the expression in this passage include” “Everything is fine,”—Contemporary English Version; “Everything is all right”—New International Version; “It is all right”—New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁷ Greg Hills' Sermon on "Gospel Centered Community: A Joyful Community", at First Presbyterian Church Northshore, Ipswich, Massachusetts on October 1, 2017. https://fpcnorthshoreipswich.com/media-resources/sermons?wpv_view_count=36&wpv_post_search=&wpv-speaker=greg-hills&wpv-series=0&wpv_paged=8# (Accessed: Sept. 14, 2020).

¹⁸ Excerpt from Doyin Emmanuel's survey response to the author.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), xii. Emphasis in italics is Sunquist's.

²¹ Sunquist, 396.

²² Sunquist, 235–69.

²³ Sunquist, 238.

²⁴ Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone - Simon & Schuster Inc, 1996), 104; See also: Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 149.

²⁵ Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 156; See also: Kirsopp Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), 337.

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwM9PPc9Q4Q> (Accessed: April 17, 2020).

²⁷ Todd M. Johnson et al., "Christianity 2017: Five Hundred Years of Protestant Christianity," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 41, no. 1 (2017): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939316669492>.

²⁸ Johnson et al., 44.

²⁹ CartoMission, *Christian Change, 1970-2015*, 2017, 2017, <https://cartomission.com/2017/05/23/christian-change-1970-2015/> (Accessed: Oct 24, 2017).

³⁰ Conversion (in and out) is one of the demographic factors that are shaping Christian growth in Africa among birth, death, immigration and emigration. See: <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/1ChristianityinAfricaFINAL.pdf> (Accessed: Oct. 3, 2017)

³¹ Excerpt from Matthew Brayshaw's survey response to the author.

³² Ibid. The emphasis is one that Matthew Brayshaw conveys.

³³ Dondo Iorlamen is (at the time of writing this essay) the National Director of CAPRO Nigeria – an African initiated and non-denominational mission organization committed to taking the gospel to Unreached Peoples Groups.

³⁴ Dondo Iorlamen sent the text of this testimony on November 9, 2017 via WhatsApp.

³⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1970), 141.; Fred L Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee, eds., *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 8. John Samuel Mbiti is an African theologian, author, teacher and pastor who has been called "the father of contemporary African theology" http://www.dacb.org/stories/kenya/mbiti_john.html (Accessed: May 25, 2017) . Mbiti drew attention to this African philosophy in his work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

³⁶ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 5.

³⁷ I am thankful to my Cameroonian friend, Emmanuel Yegar (MA in Intercultural Studies), who shared this insight with me.

³⁸ I thank my Malawian friend, Chrispin Dambula (PhD student at Fuller Theological Seminary) for this insight.

³⁹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 31.

⁴⁰ We must acknowledge that it is not in all Churches in Africa that the principle of *ubuntu* is being lived out. There are churches in Africa where their leaders have towed the steps of what they saw their Euro-North American counterparts do. Such leaders imported into the African context what is referred today as the “Wealth and Health Gospel.” In such Churches in Africa, the broad expression of the principle of *ubuntu* may be limited.

⁴¹ The Ubuntu Project, “Ubuntu Code of Conduct V 2.0: Community,” n.d., <https://www.ubuntu.com/about/about-ubuntu/conduct> (Accessed: Dec. 15, 2017).

⁴² <https://www.ubuntu.com/about/about-ubuntu> (Accessed: Dec. 15, 2017)

⁴³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 241.

⁴⁴ Paul’s single rhetorical question in the Greek text (1Thess. 2:19) is often translated into two questions in most English translations (ESV, NIV, NRSV, etc.).

⁴⁵ Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1460–61.

⁴⁶ Reisacher, *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World*, 16.

⁴⁷ Moltmann, “Christianity: A Religion of Joy,” 1.

⁴⁸ N. T. Wright, “Joy: Some New Testament Perspectives and Questions,” in *Joy and Human Flourishing*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 40, 55.