

**Summary of Fairlington UMC Reconciling Ministry Event:
LGBT Repression in Christian Africa**

**Speaker: Dennis Akpona, Reconciling Ministry Network African Outreach Coordinator
Saturday, April 9, 2016**

Dennis Akpona shared the story of his journey living as a closeted, gay man in Nigeria and finding his way to the United States thru the asylum process, now living in Chicago and working for the Reconciling Ministry Network (headquartered there) and doing other volunteer work.

Dennis started by sharing that there are stiff 10 year jail sentences for a variety of violations related to homosexuality: being a self-avowed homosexual, or being a family member of straight ally who knowingly covers up for someone who is homosexual. In addition, health workers are not allowed to knowingly treat LGBT people, and same sex marriage is prohibited.

He shared how in Africa, that as a result of this repression, many LGBT individuals commit suicide. Sexual exploitation and police rape of LGBT people is common. Church is not an option for LGBT people because pastors commonly tell those in the LGBT people they are evil and are literally the cause of the world's problems, from AIDS to poverty. In his community, you were taught that you would not go to heaven if you are homosexual or act in ways that support those who are LGBT.

Dennis has a degree in social work from Nigeria. While in Nigeria, Dennis worked for seven years in the nonprofit sector for a number of organizations including Journalists Against AIDS, Initiative for Equal Rights and Population Council.

In 2011, Dennis' friend in the LGBT community of Lagos, Nigeria was arrested, tortured, and beaten for three days. His friend was forced to give over names of other homosexuals, and gave Dennis' name to the police.

Dennis was then arrested, also beaten, and held for four days; during this time, he was given water and no food. During this time, they tried to force him to give the names of other gay people in the community and state. As a trained social worker, he refused to do so saying that he could not violate the confidentiality of the people he worked with and release those names publicly. The police would have Dennis stand outside the front of the headquarters; shaming him and telling passersby he was gay (think the Scarlet letter). The police tried to extort money out of him as a condition of his release.

Once finally released, Dennis left Lagos and went to Kaduna, Nigeria. He soon discovered he had escaped one bad situation only to find himself in a worse situation. Kaduna had a heavy Muslim population and abided by Sharia laws. The local Sharia Commission soon learned of his work on LGBT issues, and he knew he would have to flee for Nigeria for his safety.

Since the headquarters for the work he was doing at the time was based in New York, he used that connection to enter the asylum process. First he had to go thru a 90 day waiting period and an extensive background process. He used Facebook to alert people he knew in New York City and Chicago that he was coming to the United States.

Dennis first went to New York City, and once again, found that he had left one bad situation only to find himself in an equally bad situation. His New York acquaintance extorted him by requiring sexual favors as a condition for his staying with him. As a result, he decided to move to Chicago; the year is now 2013.

In Chicago, Dennis began working thru the asylum process. He found a female lawyer to work with him to find housing, food, and employment. He struggled with her to find job placements that matched his strong education background and ability to speak English. Dennis discovered the asylum process was plagued with problems, from sex trafficking to poverty to lack of job opportunities; many LGBT asylum seekers found sex as the only option to survive. He learned the African view of America as a “perfect” place was not true.

Friends of his at Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago (a reconciling church) started an asylum support program to help address the gaps and problems LGBT people faced as asylum seekers in the United States. In March 2014, there was a press conference at Broadway UMC to highlight problems for LGBT people seeking asylum, and the press came. In addition, representatives from the Reconciling Ministry Network (RMN) were present. Four weeks later, Dennis was granted asylum.

One of the first jobs his lawyer and asylum representative found was a dishwasher, which Dennis found to be way beneath his abilities and experience. He tried it for a while, working an 8pm to 3am shift; he did it because he desperately needed money. Eventually, due to his English skills, he got a job with the Chicago AIDS Foundation (making more than his legal representative!).

A common theme in his story, Dennis found the push and pull of going thru the asylum process, and difficulty to make ends meet, a harrowing experience. In a way he missed Nigeria despite the persecution he faced there, because at least he understood and could relate to the culture.

Eventually, thanks to the March 2014 press event, RMN reached out to him and first offered him a job as a part-time job as a communication associate, which he took. That morphed into asking him to be the coordinator with the African Conferences of the United Methodist Church, with grant monies RMN had received to build relationships within the UMC of Africa. Dennis was nervous to do this work since he had not been to church in years and knew in most of Africa, he would not be welcome as an openly gay man in a church.

Dennis describes building relationships between African United Methodists and Methodists in the United States as the most difficult job of his life. Given the high esteem with which pastors in Africa are held, building bridges with them is not easy.

To approach his new work, Dennis brainstormed with RMN staff to identify the key issues on the ground that those in Africa faced as an entry point to his bridge building work. The top three issues identified were: 1) HIV and AIDS; 2) woman and child poverty; and 3) pastors in the UM Church who lacked any formal training.

Dennis' first RMN assignment that he launched was to provide more formal Biblical and theological training to African pastors, both generally and on human sexuality. He noted that African United Methodists only hear from people in the United States when General Conference is about to convene, seeking to sway their votes on policy and social issues coming before Conference. Dennis believes this approach cannot work, and is representative of all the exploitation he experienced in African and the American asylum system as a gay man. Rather, Dennis' goal in his new job is to build new and lasting relationships with African United Methodist pastors and laity that are related to issues they face on the ground, and not the hot-button social issues that come before General Conference.

Dennis explained that it is hard to tell African pastors and laity about God's all-inclusive love for everyone when these people are literally hungry and thirsty. Thus to build durable relationships, we must first provide them with their most basic needs – water and food – to show them that God loves them. Africans often fear religious people and missionaries from America are attempting to colonize them again.

Dennis attended a Liberian Partners Summit in Detroit, where he met United Methodist pastors and the area Bishop, from that country. That encounter led to spearheading his main goal at RMN to train local African United Methodist pastors. He recently traveled to Liberia and the Ivory Coast to do this training. He feared that people would know or recognize him, since he was on Facebook etc., which would undermine his mission. A trusted African pastor, Grace, accompanied him and which built trust in him among people he met. The focus in this training is to provide a new understanding of the Bible and God's love, with a focus on personal stories and accepting LGBT identity. Dennis says gay marriage in Africa is a long way off as the first focus must be on welcoming LGBT people as children of God.

Dennis ended his presentation by noting that he looks forward to waking up every day. He gives thanks for who he is, and that he is created in God's image. He knows he is the person God made him to be.

Questions and Answers

Q: What is the basis for the bias against LGBT people in Africa?

A: Bishops in the United Methodist Church and other denominations are seen as kings. God works directly thru Bishops and pastors, and what they say is believed as the truth and not questioned. Thus, since pastors proclaim homosexuality as evil, it is seen as the final word on this topic. Also, the church and its leaders, as well as the government, take advantage of poverty and other life struggles Africans face by saying that all these problems will be eradicated if we can just get rid of LGBT people; for example, Ebola was blamed on LGBT people.

Q: How are people becoming United Methodist pastors in Africa without training?

A: While there are seminaries in Africa, most people cannot afford them. Thus people become pastors thru peer-to-peer training; pastor to person training. Thus these people often lack theological and Biblical training. The community's opinion is placed above the person's, or the LGBT person's, experience. Many pastors focus on growing church money and raising money, versus nurturing and caring for the well-being of its members, many who are marginalized and suffering from poverty, lack of education, being a woman, etc.; there is little focus on the church as a place of welcome and refuge.

Q: How did Dennis note succumb to the feeling of not being beloved by God?

A: It was most certainly not due to his family, who did not accept his being a gay man. Rather, it was a group of close, but hidden, LGBT friends who carried him through.

Q: Elaborate on the role of money and how it is used to exploit LGBT people in Africa [note this was a common theme throughout Dennis' presentation]

A: LGBT people in Africa are often threatened by police, family, or the government to be "outed" if they do not give that person money, whether or not it is even true that person is gay. Dennis noted even upon his arrival to the United States, he saw money used to exploit LGBT people from Africa entering the asylum system. Some Africans arrive in America, and despite having a visa and going thru the asylum background check process, are immediately detained in a detention center or prison. Bonds ranging from \$7,500 to \$50,000 are levied which these people cannot possibly afford; they find themselves going from one prison in Africa literally into another prison in the United States. The Good News movement, the traditional conservative caucus group in the United Methodist Church, gives generous amounts of money to communities in Africa for local projects, along with selling the message that being LGBT is evil or wrong; they use money to buy influence among United Methodists in Africa and delegates coming from Africa to General Conference every four years. Money is power.

Q: Where is the Wesleyan role of experience and reason in church teaching among United Methodists in Africa?

A: The biggest influences on theology come from pastors, parents, and friends; whatever message they say is the message that is predominant. Also, much of what LGBT Africans are facing is a residual from British colonization, which brought a specific Christian theology to the continent, as well as sodomy and other laws, that influences theology today. A common folklore in African culture is that gay people are rich; Dennis strongly attests that notion is not true and that for himself and many other LGBT people, poverty is a common struggle they endure along with others in the community.

Q: Has the Justice Fund provided by the Methodist Church to support asylum seekers helped his work with Chicago asylum groups?

A: Yes, that connection has sped up funding and support for his local asylum group that he works with, and has helped prioritize asylum cases he has worked on. The “funding clause” in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, which prohibits using church funds (from which the Justice Fund monies are derived) from being used to promote homosexuality, poses challenges in doing asylum work for LGBT people.

Q: Elaborate on the roles between African governments and churches in Africa.

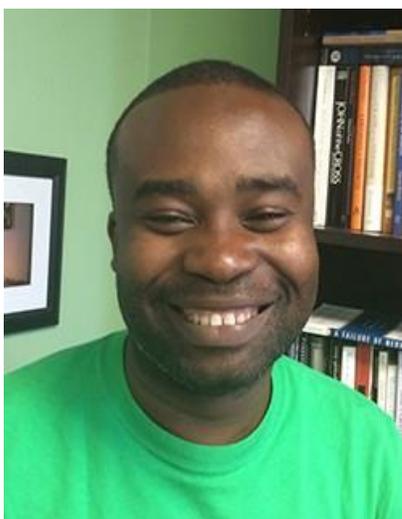
A: Africa wants to be autonomous. This includes African United Methodist Churches and other denominations wanting to be autonomous. They want to vote their own way at General Conference every four years without being pressured. He knows of young Ivory Coast delegates to General Conference who are ok with homosexuality. He knows of African United Methodist Bishops who are ok with homosexuality but will never openly speak or vote in a favorable way on this issue given pressures they face. Women, who in Africa’s patriarchal society, are not allowed to speak their mind about social issues, either in community or in churches; many women share a different view but fear to speak it. RMN is sponsoring 45 week internship programs starting late summer that will bring local pastors to the US to do Biblical and other training that will open the eyes of these people to new ways of seeing LGBT and other issues.

Q: Are there regional differences in Africa on the issue of homosexuality?

A: South Africa and Mozambique are more progressive. However, even in those countries, the more liberal government positions may not always translate into local churches and teachings. For example, many Methodists in Mozambique are unhappy that a female United Methodist Bishop was elected from that country.

Q: How can we or others in local churches support Dennis in his work?

A: Prayer; raising money; supporting asylum seekers including hosting them in your homes; phoning and emailing church and government leaders on this issue.



Dennis Akpona is the Coordinator for African Central Conferences at the Reconciling Ministry Network, working to make the United Methodist Church more welcoming of its LGBT brothers and sisters. Dennis was recently granted asylum in the United States after fleeing persecution he faced as a gay man in Nigeria. He formerly worked at AIDS Foundation of Chicago and is a co-founder of Chicago LGBT Asylum Support Program or CLASP. Knowing first-hand the difficulty arriving asylum seekers face and the lack of resources available to them, Dennis took it upon himself to organize and start CLASP to assist LGBT asylum seekers while they await the long and complicated process of applying for asylum. Finally, Dennis is pursuing a Social Work degree at Northeastern Illinois University.