THE CHURCH AND THE WAVE OF DESPAIR AND DISTRUST IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

AN **ECHURCH** RESEARCH REPORT | BY **PROF STEPHAN JOUBERT**

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Jesus - sigbaar, voelbaar, verstaanbaar

In December 2008 Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon released a study on the origin of distrust in 17 countries in Africa, which includes all countries in Southern Africa. They indicate that only 50% of the respondents implicitly trust their families; 28% of people trust their neighbours to a large degree; 26% place their trust in other members of their own groups, and only 16% trust strangers implicitly.

Meanwhile a new study of the world-renowned Pew Organisation released on 19 December 2011 indicate that almost one in every four of the approximate 2,18 billion Christians on earth live in Sub-Sahara Africa. This growth is breath-taking. In 1910 only 1,4% of this area belonged to the Christian faith, but by 2010 it has grown to 23,6%.

Talking of research, the "World Happiness Report" of the United Nations has just been released on 2 April 2012. From this report it is clear that the Scandanavian countries and the Netherlands are the happiest places on earth, with countries in Sub-Sahara Africa the unhappiest. (If my calculations are correct, South Africa is 90th on this happiness list.) Things such as political freedom, strong social networks and the absence of corruption are crucial factors that determine people's personal happiness. Unemployment, unstable family relationships and poor medical care in turn lead to lower levels of happiness.

The quickest growth of Christianity worldwide currently takes place in Sub-Sahara Africa. Despite this, the people in this area are filled with mistrust and unhappiness. These crises should therefore have priority on the agenda of all local churches and ministries. Faith should have a more profound and healing impact on societies. C. S. Lewis justly writes in Mere Christianity: "He (Christ) came to this world and became a man in order tospread to other men the kind of life He has – by what I call 'good infection'".

How does the church become a good infection to infect the world with God's hope? Well, by neverending selfless service in the Name of Jesus, like he teaches us in Matthew 25:31-44. The good news is that it is already happening in many places. One example: In an article in "Science Now" Elizabeth Pennisi writes about a lecture held by the American evolutionary biologist David Hughes on 22 August 2011 in Europe. In this lecture he alleges that the mainstream religions of the world developed or flourished during the same time that epidemics afflicted the world. Rather that fleeing away from these problems, during epidemics such as measles and polio followers of Christianity chose to remain among the sick and look after them rather than fleeing.

Hughes also indicates that the current landscape of Malawi is in fact being transformed by Christians' compassion. His colleague, Jenny Trinitapoli, talked to 3,000 people in 1,000 settlements in Malawi. In this country where 1 in 14 adults die of Aids, she found that approximately 30% of Christians regularly visit these victims. This has led to a huge growth in the church in Malawi. People that are HIV positive or have Aids have realised that Christians do not label or write them off like other people do. They also realised that Christians care for them with great compassion.

In our own country there are fulltime spreaders of hope!

ABOUT EKERK RESEARCH

Please visit Echo or PEN in Pretoria's city centre, or one of the numerous exciting actions of local churches across our country, and you will see what I mean. There are more than enough Christians in Sub-Sahara Africa to push aside the depressing spirit of despair. And to allow true happiness to resound, that kind of happiness that includes living bread and real bread for the poor and searching people and people without hope.

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