

Chapter 6

Challenges from Religious Communities in Spreading the Gospel

Hugh M. Matheson

I HAVE SPENT six years in Africa but have not made any formal studies of the topic at hand, so my remarks will be more anecdotal than empirical. I recently finished four years as the Church's international legal counsel for Africa. For part of that time, I also served as the Church's Africa Area director of public affairs. Of course, I do not speak for the Church. With those disclaimers out of the way, we can turn to the assigned topic: the challenges of religious communities in spreading the gospel.

First, let us talk about the opportunities in religious communities. What if Joseph Smith had come on the scene prior to the Reformation, or what if he had lived among non-Christians? In Africa the people who have already been converted to Christianity, in some form or another, are often more likely to be ready to hear the gospel. So the existence of other religious communities, especially Christian religious communities, which are teaching basic moral codes and strengthening the family, is a good thing. They bring light into people's lives and make them more receptive to the full light of the restored gospel.

We are finding common ground with many of these people and groups as we work to promote positive values, including the defense of the family. I see great opportunities for the Church to build bridges with the Islamic community in Nigeria and other African countries as we work together in international forums about the family. So there are great opportunities for spreading the gospel and promoting shared values because religious communities exist.

Of course, religious communities also present challenges, not the least of which arise because of apparently competitive proselytizing activities. For example, a good Protestant church sends missionaries to Africa and spends a lot of time, money, and effort to convert people from their traditional beliefs. Then Latter-day Saint missionaries are sometimes seen as coming along and stealing some of the best people. These perceptions can lead to mistrust and can foster a desire to push against the Church's missionary effort.

Many of these religious groups have ties with parent organizations in the U.S. or Europe. When they begin to notice our arrival and growth in African cities, they start checking with headquarters. They receive all the "anti-Latter-day Saint" stuff, and they start to spread it around through congregations and the media. Unfortunately, human nature has a tendency to believe the first thing it hears about a subject. The next person who comes along and tries to change someone's opinion about a subject has a huge burden of proof. That is certainly true with perceptions of the Church. Before missionaries get very far in a new place, the people have often heard some pretty wild things about us that take some time to dislodge.

Sometimes minor misunderstandings are easily corrected. In Nairobi, I met an educated woman, very active in her church, whose preacher had quoted the New Testament in warning against the "Mammons" and the "Book of Mammon." With the beautiful East African-British accent, the two words do sound remarkably similar: *Mormon* and *mammon*. She wondered how we could possibly be proclaiming this "Book of Mammon" when the New Testament clearly states, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). This is a

silly little thing, but it is an example of the preconceived notions that are created about what we are and what we stand for.

There are many more serious examples, such as the misinformation that led to the freeze of the Church's activities in Ghana in the 1980s. Many great stories of faith arose out of that episode, which I am sure are being chronicled elsewhere. The end result was that the Church and its relationships in Ghana are stronger for having passed through that. But it was a costly and distracting episode that we would not want to see repeated. Many examples of misinformation are out there and are being spread by some of these religious communities. We have a lot of work to do.

It was frustrating to see the Church being misrepresented by religious groups in an African country. At the same time, I knew that in Salt Lake City and around the world we were cooperating with some of the same groups in humanitarian work, defense of religious freedom, promotion of family-friendly policies, and other areas. We need more communication to get past that hurdle of the bad first impressions laid down by those who are unfriendly toward the Church.

But religious opposition is and always has been a fact of life for the restored gospel. Those of us who have been on missions know that. One of my mission presidents is President E. Dale LeBaron. He thought I needed some reforming, so he put me in Potchefstroom, South Africa, for seven months, and I used to say it was like being a Catholic missionary in Provo. The city was the heart of the South African Dutch Reformed Church. The local *dominee* would go and collect copies of the Book of Mormon that we had placed with investigators, and it was a great experience when we would go get them back from him. You could say we were pioneering in the area of interfaith relations.

The Church survives and actually thrives in the face of this kind of religious opposition. But it can impinge on our ability to even operate in a country where these groups have access to political levers. Many discuss secularization and the marginalization of

religious groups from public-policy making in the Western world. In Africa the opposite case exists. Often religions can constitute very powerful political blocs. Most countries have a church or a group of churches that support the head of state, and others support the opposition. Despite our clearly stated and carefully protected political neutrality, we sometimes get caught in serious political crossfire.

In most of these countries, we are required by law to register with the government to begin operating, and that can be a lengthy process partly because of these political concerns and because of opposition from politically powerful religious groups. Of course, we always go through the front door and are very careful about doing everything by the book, even if we are the only ones following the rules. Sometimes we have to wait while government leaders walk the political tightrope involved in letting us come into their country despite the opposition of some religious groups.

Even after going through that process of registration, we can face misunderstandings with governments. We like to work quietly. After going through the front door of registration, we do not make much hoopla. We just want to preach the gospel to families and individuals. But governments who have learned to see churches as political activists can easily assume that if you are not with them, you are against them. Sometimes our quiet but rapid growth comes to the notice of the government. The whispering starts, and word goes to the head of state: "These people are here, and they are spending money on buildings and programs and missionaries from overseas, and they are stealing the best people from our churches." Then pretty soon the Church is suspect. That is the kind of thing that happens in Africa. But as Area President J. Richard Clarke used to say, "If you can not stand a little competition, you had better not be in Africa."

All these postindependence African constitutions have religious freedom provisions. I have asked legal scholars, Supreme Court justices, and law deans all over the African continent about religious freedom case law in their countries. Of course, in the U.S. the Church practically wrote much of the case law on religious freedom, some of

it good and some of it not so good. African legal scholars are familiar with American constitutional law, but when I asked if anything like it exists in modern African law, they just looked at me like I was an idiot: “What case law? You do not sue the government. You would not dare to take the ministry of interior or the ministry of justice to court, trying to enforce the constitutional provision on freedom on religion. You would be mad to try such a thing.”

African governments have great words on paper, but they are not the words they live by. The words they *do* live by have a lot more to do with political power bases and political reality, often far from the ideal. But U.S. citizens cannot get too cocky; it has taken us more than two centuries and one civil war to get where we are on some of these issues.

Africa seems to be a tricky environment, but it is really kind of a simple environment. After you have been there a while, you get into the flow of it, and you start to know when to take things at face value and when to look behind the words for the cultural, political, and legal meanings. Unfortunately, the undercurrents of corruption and self-dealing color much of what goes on.

In all this corruption, there are plenty of opportunities to do good, to find common ground with thoughtful, moral people. Earlier I referred to the human tendency to believe the first bit of information on a given subject and not to believe later contradictory information. This tendency operates in Africa, and people there can be swayed by first impressions. But I also noticed that many Africans, especially in the cities, are sophisticated consumers of rhetoric. During the colonial era and in the years of independence since, they have had plenty of paternalistic, self-serving propaganda thrown at them. Though the initial mass reaction to propoganda can be exaggerated and even hysterical, the more thoughtful people are quite adept at subjecting things to a smell test. They know that institutions, including the media and especially the official media, put a spin on things and even make outright fabrications. Eventually, even the less thoughtful

folks who were initially led down the garden path will admit they were deceived. Africans can be quite skeptical, curious, and open-minded. They debate things. I have had many well-reasoned conversations with taxi drivers, game guides, attorneys, church colleagues, media workers, and even government officials in Africa on political, legal, and religious topics.

If these opportunities are approached wisely and with some cultural savvy, the Church can tell its own story and be a powerful force for good in these countries. Unlike Japan, for instance, where it seems it would be very difficult to ever penetrate the consciousness of even a significant minority of the people, Church representatives can go into a capital city in Africa and become carefully and appropriately acquainted with powerful elites, heads of the state, and radio, television, and newspaper editors. Those relationships can sometimes be two-edged swords, but I think they are worth developing. Humanitarian work and profamily policy initiatives can serve the basis for relationship building. So can the general topic of religious tolerance and interfaith civility.

Because somebody is going to be telling our story, it might as well be us. One great way to start is by building bridges of understanding with religious leaders, humanitarian donors, media editors, academia, and governments. Of course, much great work is already being done in those areas by representatives of the Church: Latter-day Saint Charities, Brigham Young University, the Thrasher Research Fund, World Family Policy Center, Bonneville Media, Church Hosting, the International Affairs office in Washington, and many private individuals.

I think this work should continue and be encouraged at the institutional and individual levels. My friends from the Public Affairs Department are doing great work in this area. I would say that they and all of us should do all we can to build relationships and improve public understanding so we can prepare the ground, avoid some of these silly misunderstandings, and inoculate against some of the more outlandish things that might be said about the Church.

You can never know what fruit a relationship will bear in the future. In a certain African country a few years ago, we were targeted by an official inquiry on the subject of devil worship. Because of these and other accusations, the Church was apparently facing imminently pending deregistration. A conscientious man who had studied in the U.S. thirty years earlier and was impressed with some Latter-day Saints he had met warned us of this. He had visited Temple Square and knew the Church's standing and reputation in the U.S. All these years later, he had a high position in the particular government ministry that was reviewing our case. He contacted us and quite appropriately gave us the opportunity to have some input into the process. I cannot talk about the details, but over the next months the Lord put the pieces together, and some gentle words went to the head of state over a period of time, and we remained legally registered in that country.

These kinds of challenges can be averted and even prevented as we continue to make wise use of public communications, public affairs, and government relations. As the Brethren continue to send wise, seasoned, capable, humble, and faithful mission presidents and missionaries to work in these countries, we can avoid such challenges. And most important, these problems can be avoided as the marvelous, faithful local members take advantage of opportunities to boldly and publicly tell the truth.

In closing, I will tell one story about the important role of local members and priesthood leaders. A situation arose in an African country where a visiting American, who happened to be a member of the Church, was accused of doing something very unusual. I could tell you some of what was reported, but the stories were pretty gruesome. We still do not know what really happened, but suffice it to say that it was a medical situation that ended up creating some wild stories. This story hit the tabloids, and even the more reliable newspapers could not refrain from picking up this sensational tale. And, of course, they related his alleged bizarre behavior to his Church membership.

We Westerners, sitting in the area office, talked about how the Church should and should not respond. We got some very helpful input from Brother Michael Otterson in Public Affairs on an immediate response strategy, which we relayed to the local leaders. Once past that immediate response, the local priesthood leaders followed the established order of the Church by convening a multistake public affairs council under the leadership of a stake president and comprising good, solid men and women who were members and friends of the Church. They took one or two days to counsel together and plan a response. They communicated with the Area President, who also invited some participation from me. We gave them our insights. Then President James O. Mason led us in prayer and simply left the matter in the Lord's hands as He might inspire that local public affairs council to act.

And what did the council do? Things we Westerners might never have done. They turned the publicity into a missionary event! They set up open house displays at a stake center. They had rooms dedicated to family home evening, the Relief Society, the Young Men, the Young Women, and so on. They led the reporters and camera crews through the open house and then began the press conference with an opening hymn and an opening prayer. The stake president got up and said he did not know what had happened in that particular unusual event, but if it was anything like what was reported, the Church was against it. "You know how stories get told in our country," he said, "so let's not judge the man too quickly." And then he explained the doctrines and programs of the Church and testified of the Savior.

They had a closing hymn, and the media personnel were singing along. Some of the reporters were seen with tears in their eyes. Thereafter ensued two or three weeks of the best coverage of the Church we have ever had in that country or any other country in Africa.

Now, would we do that at a press conference in the United States? It would be fun to try! The point is that the local members knew the local press, and they were inspired that this was the appropriate approach.

The reaction of the media in that situation demonstrates the African thoughtfulness I mentioned earlier. These people, some of whom can so quickly jump to the wrong conclusions, are ultimately likely to recognize this cultural tendency and then adjust and say, “Hold on, let’s find out what is really going on here.” For instance, many Church members in Ghana believe that our current strength there is a result of heightened interest in the Church because the government had chased us out in the 1980s.

I do not get too worried about challenges presented by religious groups or the governments who are sometimes swayed by them. The Lord is in charge, and He knows what He is doing. And despite our clumsiness and anxiety, He somehow makes it work. When the Lord states that the gospel will “be proclaimed by the weak and the simple” (D&C 1:23), I do not think that His words are limited to nineteen-year-olds. With His help, these challenges easily become opportunities.

I will never forget a statement President Hinckley made to the Saints in Johannesburg, South Africa, when he visited in February 1998. South Africa, of course, faces all manner of economic and security challenges that are consistent with those of all developing countries and exacerbated by decades of the inefficient and immoral apartheid political system. President Hinckley’s advice to us was to “starve your problems and feed your opportunities”—good counsel for individuals and institutions everywhere.

Religious and political challenges make frequent appearances in the pages of Church history. But they have resulted in some of the Church’s greatest strengths, whether the fierce opposition to early missionary work in the British Isles, the mob violence in Missouri and the march of Zion’s Camp, or the hardships of the westward migration and settling in the barren Great Basin. We should not be

surprised when these historical patterns are repeated in countries where the restored gospel is newly introduced. We anxiously do the best we can, and the Lord and good people on the ground always make things turn out for the best in the long run.

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