

## **The early attempts at ecumenical co-operation in East Africa: the case of the Kikuyu Conference of 1913**

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### *Abstract*

Kikuyu 1913 was the first fully fledged conference on the unity of the Church in what was then British East Africa – today's Kenya. Although there were other meetings, such as Maseno 1908, Kijabe 1909 and Nairobi 1911, the Kikuyu Conference of 1913 was the most significant, because it had the potential to abolish spheres of influence that confined the missionary societies in their various geographical zones. Characteristically, the Conference was marred by theo-doctrinal controversies. At the top of the list was the so-called Westonian controversy (Bishop Frank Weston of the Church Mission Society, Zanzibar, protested against any attempts to administer the Eucharist to non-Anglicans). Other doctrinal controversies included questions concerning the sacrament of baptism. So how successful was Kikuyu 1913 in its bid to promote ecumenical cooperation in British East Africa? Does this Conference have any real legacy? How relevant is the Kikuyu Conference of 1913 to our contemporary situation in Africa? In its methodology, this article attempts to analyse various issues in order to assess the success of this important conference in the history of the ecumenical movement in East Africa and beyond.

### **Introduction**

The Rev Dr Johann Ludwig Krapf can be regarded as the pioneer missionary in Eastern Africa, following his arrival at Rabai in the coastal city of Mombasa in 1844. Despite being a German and a Lutheran priest, he was sent to East Africa by a British missionary agency, the Church Missionary

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Society (CMS). Over time, other missionary bodies followed suit and, by 1900, there were many groups operating in British East Africa. As missionary work expanded in the 19th century, it became evident that consultation between missionary societies was necessary so that “comity” arrangements could be made between these societies. In turn, it is critical to appreciate the fact that “comity” arrangements were the deliberate plans of the missionary societies about how to share out geographical areas so that two or more missions did not work in the same district (thus causing unnecessary confusion and/or rivalry). Examples of such “comity” conferences in East Africa include: Maseno 1908;<sup>2</sup> Kijabe, October 1909;<sup>3</sup> Nairobi, June 7-11, 1909;<sup>4</sup> Nairobi, January 1910; and Nairobi, February 1911 – which prepared the way for Kikuyu 1913<sup>5</sup> (Anderson 1984: 217).

Characteristically, these missions worked independently but in mutually recognised spheres, often following different approaches to their work. As they met at local levels to work out how to conduct their operations, the missionaries realised that the problems they faced in the field were largely the same, and came up with the idea of forming a common front to address these problems. Thus, in 1908, a local conference was held at Maseno to deal with problems arising from the influx of missionaries into the area. A second conference was held at Kijabe the same year and expressed

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<sup>2</sup> At this early stage, the idea of forming a federation had not been mooted, since societies working in Nyanza region of Western Kenya met together only to discuss local problems of missionary comity, linguistic agreements and translation problems. There was, therefore, no thought of unity, but only an attempt to secure recognized spheres of influence and to avoid needless overlapping and confusion (Cole 1957:3).

<sup>3</sup> During the October 1909 Kijabe meeting, it was felt that the question of a union was impracticable at the time, and a scheme of Federation was seen as a better option (Cole 1957:4). This proposal for a Federation was again referred to a Second General Committee of Missionaries, which met in Nairobi in January, 1910, and the findings of the Committee were sent to the various home authorities. A Third General Committee met in Nairobi in February of 1911 to consider replies. This meeting ended in a deadlock, and no further steps were taken for two years (Cole 1957:4).

<sup>4</sup> In the United Missionary Conference held in Nairobi from June 7-11, 1909, the Resolution of the Nyanza/Maseno 2 conference of January 1909 regarding a united Church. Archdeacon (later Bishop) Willis read a paper on “The Desirability of a Single Native Church in British East Africa.” In the paper, Willis argued not only for the desirability of a single native Church, but also the possibility of achieving it, the conditions that might make it possible, and the price they must be prepared to pay for it (Cole 1957:3). The conference also appointed a small sub-committee that met at Kijabe in October 1909. This committee was set to assess the steps towards the formation of a United Native Church.

<sup>5</sup> At the international level, there were conferences at Liverpool, England in 1860, in London in 1888, and in New York in 1900. At the last two conferences suggestions were made to form an International Missionary Council. This idea was well received at New York, although nothing substantial came out of it. Nevertheless, the most important missionary conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910 (Anderson 1984:217). Arguably, Edinburgh 1910 and Vatican II, 1962-1965, are the two most important ecumenical gatherings of the 20th century.

the need to “encourage the growth of what is common between the different branches of the Church of Christ” (Capon 1962:8). In October 1909, yet another conference was held at Kijabe. This meeting moved strongly towards unity, resolving: “That this Conference regards the development, organisation and establishment of a united self-governing, self-supporting and self-extending Native Church as the ideal in our Missionary Work” (Anderson 1984:222).<sup>6</sup> To this end, a larger and more representative conference was held in Nairobi later in the year. This conference resolved that “the orderly development, organization and establishment of a united, self supporting, and self-propagating Native Church be the chief aim of all Mission work” (Capon 1962:7). A fifth conference held in February 1911 in Nairobi attempted to translate these broad principles into definite actions, but had to contend with a variety of challenges (these being ecclesial, social, doctrinal, political and theological). The meeting ended in a deadlock, and no further steps were taken to push for the proposed Scheme of Federation (which had been mooted in Kijabe 1909) until 1913, when another conference was held, the Kikuyu 1913.

### **The Kikuyu 1913**

The meetings referred to above set the foundation on which the United Missionary Conference was held in June 1913 at The Church of the Torch, Thogoto, Kikuyu. The conference was held with a view to solving the problems that were seen to be standing in the way of the proposed Scheme of Federation. As Cole (1957:4) notes, the Scheme for Federation was presented under the headings: Comity, Ministry, Public Worship, Membership, Sacraments and Discipline.

In a nutshell, the basis of the federation, it was argued, would be the following: the acceptance of the Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice; the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as the expression of fundamental Christian belief; common membership between churches; regular administration of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; and a common form of organisation (Capon 1952, 1962). In this meeting, a proposed constitution for a federation of missions was drawn up. In turn, the constitution (which, it was hoped, would later lead to full Church union) contained an agreed doctrinal basis (Anderson 1984:232). This proposal, which was finally accepted after considerable discussion, was, in EK Cole’s view, in agreement with the Anglican Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, which held that:

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<sup>6</sup> In 1909, East Africa saw four missionary conferences. In particular, the Kijabe 1909 discussed Venn’s ‘Three Self’ missionary policy and the then recently established ‘Native Anglican Church’ in Uganda. Interestingly, Edinburgh Missionary Conference took place in the following year. This was followed in East Africa by the two Kikuyu Conferences of 1913 and 1918.

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- a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as 'containing all things necessary to Salvation,' and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- b) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – Ministered with unfailling use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church (Cole 1957:4).

This view was endorsed by the various missionary societies that participated in the Kikuyu 1913. The Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), for instance, had favourable words for the proposed Scheme of Federation. In its General Assembly of May 1914, the CSM stated:

The General Assembly have (sic) learned with much satisfaction of the proposed Federation of the Missions of our own and other branches of the Church of Christ in British East Africa. Recognising the great importance of such intimate co-operation alike for the present advance of Christianity in the Field, and for its defence against opposing forces and influences, and also for the bearing it must exercise on the ultimate formation of a United African Church, they desire the Foreign Mission Committee to continue to foster the movement towards Federation now in progress (Cole 1957:7).

At the Conference Mr Hulburt of the African Inland Mission (AIM) gave reasons for supporting the alliance of missions (largely based on the need to evangelise). As Capon notes,

Mr Hulburt of the AIM gave reasons for his convictions that Federation was right. He felt that it would make evangelism, translation, educational and industrial work more effective. It would impress upon the natives [read African Christians] the meaning of the One Church, united in the worship of God and claiming One Message ... (Capon, quoted in Wanyoike 1984:118).

The Conference was attended by nine missionary groups: the Gospel Missionary Society (GMS), the German Lutheran Mission (GLM), the Friends Africa Mission (FAM), Seventh Day Adventists (SDA), the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), the United Methodist Mission (UMM), and the African Inland Mission (AIM). A constitution proposing the formation of the Federation of Missions was signed by representatives from only four out of the nine missionary groups, that is, CMS, CSM, UMM and AIM, while GMS, GLM, FAM, and SDA refused to sign. Those who did not sign the proposals, however, expressed full sympathy with the proposed federation plan. Nevertheless, the conference was a landmark in the sense that it was seen as the first step towards the formation of a united Church in British East Africa, as had been witnessed in South India (Anderson 1984:217-222).

To this end, the June 1913 Kikuyu Conference, which was chaired by Bishop JJ Willis of Uganda, met to discuss a possible federation of the various missionary bodies working in the area. This, in turn, Willis and his companions thought, would harmonise the divergences among the various mission societies in British East Africa (Kenya). It was Willis who first noted the possibilities of unseemly competition between rival European missions, and who ventured out on the long walk that would end in Kikuyu 1913. As Oliver (1952:224) notes, Willis had already given much thought to the strategic nature of Christian forces against those of Islam in East Africa; and he appears to have been genuine in his fears of a prospect of the then British East Africa being divided along nine or eight Protestant churches. Nevertheless, he was realistic that ecumenical cooperation would not be easy to achieve, and as a priest of the highly developed diocese of Uganda (of which his own Archdeaconry of Kavirondo was a mission-field), he maintained from the outset that any ecclesiastical union that was achieved would come at a very high price. In his recognition of the passive state of Christian society at the time, Willis felt that,

The edification of these Churches should proceed 'upon converging lines,' through the recognition by all missions of a single standard for Church membership, a single code of discipline, a common attitude towards certain native customs, a common form of simple worship which could be used with sufficient frequency for it to become familiar to all African Christians, and similar courses of training for African ministers based upon a common recognition of the Scriptures and the Creeds (Oliver 1952:225).

As his mission statement Willis, with the assistance of Dr Henry Scott, who was the Head of the Church of Scotland Mission, presented the above idea to

a series of preliminary mission conferences of 1908 and 1909, a move that culminated in Kikuyu 1913. To this end, Jesse Mugambi (1998:10) acknowledges that the proposals that were accepted by this conference “are surprisingly modern in their ecumenical flavour”, as the suggestions reflected clearly how an ideal ecumenical movement should progress. An appreciation that courses for African ministers needed to be contextualised is very much in line with modern African theological thinking.

Another notable player in this conference was Dr John William Arthur (1881-1952), a medical missionary and Church of Scotland priest, who served in British East Africa from 1907 to 1937.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the conference took place within the Church that he served, The Church of the Torch, Thogoto, Kikuyu. Today, the Church of Scotland in East Africa has been renamed the “Presbyterian Church of East Africa”. Arthur succeeded Dr Henry E. Scott as head of the mission on Scott’s death in 1911 and served in that capacity until 1937 (see Anderson 1977; Hutcheson 1923; MacPherson 1970). The Church of the Torch, Thogoto, Kikuyu, is still one of the largest and most influential congregations in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa today. (For example, when he became President, Jomo Kenyatta presented the Church of the Torch with new doors.)

With time, Arthur came to be regarded as one of the foremost spokesmen of missionary opinion in East Africa and worked enthusiastically for inter-mission co-operation. The idea had already been advanced, in 1907, to start a “missionary alliance”. Following several initial efforts to forge missionary co-operation, Arthur, Peel, Willis, Maclean, Hamshire, Scott and others arranged for a conference to take place at Kikuyu in 1913 for discussions on this very subject. Subsequently, the Alliance of Protestant Missions was formed (although not until 1918 owing to the outbreak in Europe of the First World War). Arthur served as leader of the Alliance for several years. As will be explained in more detail later on in this article, the Alliance was the forerunner of today’s National Council of Churches of Kenya (see Anderson 1977; Hutcheson 1923; MacPherson 1970).

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur was appointed to the post of medical missionary at the Kikuyu Mission, British East Africa (Kenya), in 1906, arriving at the mission on 1 January 1907. He opened the mission’s first hospital and became involved in its evangelistic and educational work. He began work on the first school on the Kikuyu Mission Station within six weeks of his arrival in Kenya. One of the many Africans influenced by Arthur and the mission was Jomo Kenyatta, who was a student at the mission station school. It is a fact that Dr Arthur performed surgery on Kenyatta, when the latter was still known as Johnstone Kamau. Kenyatta was a student in his early years in the mission, but the Church demanded that if he went on to secondary school that he should join the Church, but Kenyatta refused and became a clerk in Nairobi. In later years, Kenyatta regularly spoke warmly of the Kikuyu Mission station as the pioneer centre of Kenyan education. Arthur’s zeal and capacity for work led to him being honoured by the Kikuyu with the tribal name *Rigitari* (“Doctor”) (see Anderson 1977; Hutcheson 1923 and MacPherson 1970).

Significantly, even though the various missionary societies had established their spheres of interest, within which they agreed to confine their evangelistic work (read comity arrangements), the development of European farms and the growth of transport industry made it inevitable that African Christians would travel from one region to another in search of employment. With African Christians migrating to major cities such as Mombasa, Nairobi, Kisumu, Nakuru and Eldoret (among others), a clash was bound to happen, since some found themselves living and working in cities and towns where their own church denomination simply did not exist. Sometimes, Christians from one denomination would transfer their allegiance to another. Other pastoral challenges would emerge where, for instance, catechists dismissed by one mission society for misbehaviour would be engaged by another – “a few miles away, often at a higher salary than that which they had lost” (Oliver 1952:224). Additionally, adherents of the American “Gospel” missions would ask to be received by Anglicans or Presbyterians, who offered superior educational facilities. An ecumenical forum was urgently needed to address these early challenges.

The common denominator in the above denominations that participated in Kikuyu 1913, and who were operating in the then British East Africa, however, is that they were all agreed on belief in Jesus Christ and that all considered the Bible as their source of authority. Conversely, the point of disagreement was to the interpretation of specific doctrines; this would always lead to acrimony. Weston’s case (see below) is an example of just this. Characteristically, some mission societies emphasised doctrines that stressed holiness as a prerequisite for the salvation of the soul; others emphasised the sacraments; others Church governance and proper administration; while others were indifferent (Wanyoike 1984:117). AIM, which was founded in America in 1894 with the intention of evangelising the African mainland, is a case in point. In the British East Africa, AIM was unique compared with other Christian missions, largely owing to its extreme evangelical views – coupled with a peculiar emphasis on the Authority of Scripture (Wanyoike 1984:116). It drew its missionaries from various denominational churches. In turn, this meant that its support, unlike the other missionary societies, came from particular congregations; it was therefore very much a “grassroots” movement. Thus, many Protestant missionaries, including those from as far afield as Europe, who sought to come to Africa and who were possessed with evangelistic zeal, preferred associating with AIM rather than the “non-evangelistic” denominations (Wanyoike 1984:116-7). AIM was first founded in Kenya by Peter Cameron Scott, when he established a Station at Nzau in Kambaland, in 1895, the year Kenya was declared a British Protectorate. Scott believed it was imperative to coach Africans in literacy skills so that they could read the Bible – a phenomenon

that was kept carefully subordinate to the prime evangelistic objectives. As Wanyoike (1984:118) notes:

It was even considered dangerous by the majority of the AIM missionaries to give “too much education to the natives” because this might be detrimental to the Word of God. This attitude became the source of disputes between the AIM and their African adherents when the latter discovered that in various parts of the country, other missions had helped to advance their followers considerably in education, as well as in other fields.

The Conference ended with Bishop Peel of Mombasa presiding over a celebration of the Holy Communion service according to the rites of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. He was assisted by the Rev JE Hamshere, of the Church of Scotland Mission in the chapel of the Church of Scotland Mission. All the delegates, apart from the Friends (who do not believe in sacraments) participated in this united communion service. And although the Rev Norman Maclean, who was present at the 1913 Kikuyu Conference, described it as an “epoch-making event, ... the impulse of which will be felt throughout every mission field in the world”, the conference ended on a sour note when Frank Weston, of Zanzibar, a high churchman of the Anglican Church, raised a storm of protest that non-Anglicans had been allowed to receive the Eucharist (by Bishop Peel and Bishop Willis). Despite this, the delegates left Kikuyu with high hopes that the federation would soon be a reality (Capon 1962:11).

### **The Westonian controversy**

The Westonian controversy refers to the doctrinal controversy (see above) that was sparked by Frank Weston (1871–1924). Weston was arguably a great missionary scholar, an administrator, and an able preacher (from Oxford, England). Weston, who became the first Chancellor of the diocese of Zanzibar in 1903, was consecrated on October 18, 1903, and on November 6 of the same year, he was enthroned as bishop of Zanzibar. At Dulwich College and at Trinity College, Oxford, where he studied, he established himself as a good debater, a man who delighted in argument on any subject (Smith 1926:142). As far as the Westonian controversy was concerned, Weston used his power of argumentation and debate to cause a real storm in the emerging ecumenical movement in East Africa.

On August 5, 1913, Weston, who was not present at the 1913 Kikuyu Conference, wrote a letter of “strong protest to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Randall Davidson, demanding an official enquiry into the Kikuyu pro-



ceedings” (Cole 1957:5). A month later the letter was followed by a formal indictment of the Bishops of Mombasa and Uganda for heresy, demanding not only an enquiry, but a formal trial of the two bishops before the Archbishop of Canterbury and his com-provincial bishops (Cole 1957:5). This was followed by two pamphlets, “Ecclesia Anglicana: For what does she stand?” (originally the Open letter to the Bishop of St Alban’s)<sup>8</sup> and “The case against Kikuyu: a study in vital principles” (Cole 1957:5).

In “The case against Kikuyu: a study in vital principles”, Weston maintained that “as the Episcopate is the only legitimate continuation of the Apostolate according to our Lord’s will, no man (sic) who deliberately refuses to have fellowship with the Episcopate can be invited to the Church’s Altar”. For such a person “is not to be considered as a teacher under Episcopal sanction”, for a society of such people “cannot be regarded as a living, organic branch of the Catholic Church”. He went on to argue that the Sacraments administered in such a non-Episcopal society can never be regarded by the Church on the same level as the Catholic Sacraments (Cole 1957:5). Weston went on to conclude that “there is no revealed basis of reunion other than the Episcopate” (Cole 1957:6).

Weston was also concerned with the excesses of modernism and liberal thought that were gaining ground throughout the Church of England, and had already written to the Archbishop of Canterbury about modernism being a hindrance to the progress of the Gospel. Indeed, Weston had, in June 1913, read the collection of essays published as “Foundations” and felt obliged to send a response to the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was in the midst of all this that Weston heard of the Kikuyu Conference and the attempt by the two Anglican bishops, Peel and Willis, to create a federation of denominations in East Africa. In writing his pamphlet, “Ecclesia Anglicana: for what does she stand?”, Weston felt he was simply calling upon the bishops of Uganda and Mombasa to make a public admission that they had not faithfully emphasised the fact that holy communion in the Anglican Church was different from communion administered in other Protestant bodies. They had also failed to recognise the difference in Church doctrine between the Anglican Church and the other Protestant denominations, a difference that made it impossible to take communion at another church’s altar; finally, they had failed to emphasise the need for Episcopacy in the Church (see Smith 1926; Weston 1914).

In his assessment of the Kikuyu Conference, Weston saw it as simply an undue relaxation of historic teaching and discipline in favour of heresy and schism. To him, “Foundations” were dangerously subversive of Anglican

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<sup>8</sup> In turn, it is imperative to appreciate that the bishop of St Albans had recently attempt to introduce the practice of the veneration of the Virgin Mary into the diocese (Smith 1926:131).

teaching (Capon 1962). In his letter, therefore, he strongly articulated his deep shock at what had happened at the 1913 Kikuyu Conference and called for the Anglican faith and order to be upheld and for the condemnation of modernism and the Kikuyu proceedings. Concerning the united Holy Communion service, which he saw as a denial of Anglican practices, he challenged the Church of England to state her mind plainly and to desist from being what one would call “a society for shirking vital issues” (Smith 1926:148). It is no wonder, then, that when writing to Archbishop Randall Davidson of Canterbury, he averred:

We are bound to declare them [Nonconformist celebrations of the Communion] null and void, except as spiritual communion. ... a man must be in loyal fellowship with the Episcopate before he may receive Holy Communion, it is of no avail to reassert this truth hourly, and yet to invite to the reception of the Blessed Sacrament Christians who are in open rebellion to that Episcopate (Weston 1914:5).

By so doing, Weston’s letter appears to have raised the question of the coherence of the Church of England in particular and of the Anglican Communion in general. This is clearly seen in his strong contention that if the two bishops were not prepared to publicly recant their views, they should appear in an open assembly chaired by Archbishop Davidson of Canterbury. And in insisting on the Archbishop of Canterbury as the better arbitrator, he reasoned that since there was no independent Province of East Africa at the time, the Archbishop was the one to whom these bishops all owed canonical obedience (Smith 1926; Capon 1962).

As it turned out, the letter of indictment was written at the end of September 1913, and Weston was invited by Archbishop Randall Davidson to meet with him on February 7, 1914. Two days later the Archbishop issued a statement in which he made it clear that there would be no trial of the two bishops whom Weston had accused of “propagating heresy and committing schism” (Smith 1926:147). In his letter, the Archbishop wrote:

Looking carefully at present-day facts and conditions, I have no hesitation in saying that in my opinion a diocesan bishop acts rightly in sanctioning, when circumstances seem to call for it, the admission to Holy Communion of a devout Christian man to whom the ministrations of his own church are for the time inaccessible (Capon 1962:11).

As it turned out, Davidson did not allow proceedings for heresy, simply on the grounds that the Kikuyu proposals had not yet been implemented. In his conclusion, the Archbishop said,

The subject of Reunion and Intercommunion is with us day by day: it is not going to be forgotten; our efforts are not over: we ask continuously for Divine guidance towards the haven where we would be. We do not, I am persuaded, ask in vain (Capon 1962:11).

Of great interest is that the formal charge was not admitted by the Archbishop, because Weston had formulated it under a misapprehension that the proposed Federation had actually taken place (Smith 1926:149). Apparently, Davidson's solution was a compromise in the sense that he refused a heresy trial – which Bishop Weston had demanded – but appointed fourteen bishops from different provinces to advise him on the issue at hand in a meeting later that year, in July 1914, a few days before the outbreak of World War I.

In 1914, Weston drew up his own proposals for a Central Missionary Council of Episcopal and non-Episcopal churches in East Africa. These proposals included a draft service containing Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity, Self-Surrender and Communion. He recommended that, wherever possible, the service should be held in a building other than the Church, so that the sense of guilt of disunion may be deepened in the hearts of all the participants. Weston also prepared a case for the Consultative Body in his seventy-page document entitled, "The Case Against Kikuyu – a Study of Vital Principles" (Weston 1914). In this document, Weston argued that the local bishop is the link with the Catholic Church and the College of Bishops is the complete bond of union, of which the local bishop is its point of contact with the individual soul. Bishop Peel and Bishop Willis also prepared a case for the Consultative Body in a sixty-four page document entitled "Steps towards Reunion". In this document, the two bishops presented an honest attempt to interpret what they believed to be the spirit and intention of Jesus Christ for His Church in East Africa (Capon 1962).

On February 25, 1914 and on August 26, 1914, Weston and the Archbishop Davidson met again after the Consultative Committee meeting. In this meeting, Davidson had the audacity to ask Weston about his other alternative if the findings of the Consultative Committee would not favour his position. As a very determined individualist, Weston gave three alternatives. Interestingly, his first option would be to join the Roman Catholic Church without seeking ordination, but to live as a layman. His second option was to be out of communion with the diocese of Mombasa and the diocese of Uganda. His third option was to retire into lay communion in the Church of

England. Weston eventually settled for the second alternative (Capon 1962; Smith 1926).

In April 1915, Archbishop Davidson issued a seventy-page statement named “Kikuyu” in which he showed that he was more interested in the preservation of a working unity in the Anglican Communion than in the theological or pastoral issues raised by the Kikuyu controversy. In his judgment, the Archbishop did not support the idea that non-Anglican churches could simply be thought of as being outside the Church. On the other hand, it was not satisfactory to sanction the receiving of Holy Communion by Anglicans at the hands of non-Anglican ordained ministers. As it turned out, the Archbishop's judgment satisfied neither Bishop Willis nor Bishop Peel nor Bishop Weston, and added to the prevailing confusion. Such challenges dogged early ecumenical initiatives in East Africa (Smith 1926; Capon 1962).

Curiously, Bishop Weston later did an unprecedented about-turn and subsequently attended the 1918 Kikuyu Conference. In this second Kikuyu Conference, Weston gathered courage and presented a list of startlingly simple proposals for a United Church, which might conceivably have been acceptable to the delegates of 1913, but discussion of them was silenced by CE Hurburt of the AIM, who roundly declared that “no basis was possible which placed the Church above the Word of God, no ritual which would take the place of personal communion, and no ecclesiastical control which limited personal liberty in vital things” (Oliver 1952:228). This drives us to several considerations: first, by attending the second Kikuyu Conference of 1918, was Weston acknowledging that his mission against ecumenical initiatives had hit a hard rock? Second, could this be a pointer that no amount of opposition to ecumenical agenda will succeed anywhere in the world, given that it is a command from Christ Himself, who prays that all believers be one (John 17:6-11)? Or was Weston simply playing the role of Tobias and Sanballat (Nehemiah 2), who initially opposed Nehemiah in his task as he sought to rebuild the wall of the revered city of Jerusalem, only for the wall to be reconstructed with or without their input? Was he misunderstood?

Experientially, history is replete with people(s) who were consistently and gallantly opposed to ecumenical initiatives changing their tunes, at one stage, in sometimes dramatic ways, and who ended up supporting ecumenical cooperation with the same vigour that they formerly opposed them. The Roman Catholic Church is such a case in point. For years, the Catholic Church had strongly proclaimed their claim: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, (outside [the Catholic Church] there is no salvation). Even after the emergence of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, which had profound effects on the history of the Church, the Catholic Church remained unmoved on the issue. It strongly differed from the Protestant Reformation thesis of *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone) and *sola gratia* (salvation is by grace alone)

or *sola fide* (salvation is by faith alone) (see Gathogo 2006:420). It was only during the Second Vatican Council, popularly called Vatican II (1962-1965), when the Roman Catholic Church issued the Decree on Ecumenism, that, for the first time since the Council of Trent (1548-1564), allowed Catholics to interact and cooperate with Protestant and Orthodox Christians. Vatican II stated thus:

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian Communions present themselves to men (sic) as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Certainly, such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalises the world, and damages the most holy cause, the preaching of the gospel to every creature. The Lord of ages nevertheless wisely and patiently follows out the plan of his grace on our behalf, sinners that we are. In recent times he has begun to bestow more generously upon divided Christians remorse over the divisions and longing for unity (quoted in Mugambi 1998:5-6).

At this stage, it is critical to appreciate the fact that, despite the strong desire to participate actively to fulfil the prayer of Jesus in John 17:6-11 that all may be one, various impediments have turned the dream of unity into a nightmare. Why? This is due to the fact that both structural and bureaucratic constraints prevent the integration of the Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestants and the mushrooming charismatic and Pentecostal churches. When we keep this in mind, Weston's insistency on the supremacy of the episcopate model of Church governance is not an insistency created in isolation, given that it is all too easy to respect the Church structure rather than the One who has called us into one.

### **A critique of Kikuyu 1913**

One interesting aspect of Kikuyu 1913 is that it was a conference of white missionaries and could not boast so much as one black African representative among its participants. African Christians were not involved in the proceedings; the white missionaries saw themselves as the authorities on the future of Christianity in Africa. As a result, the African dimension of ecumenism was totally lacking. To this end, Zablon Nthamburi (1995:11) goes beyond the African exclusion in the Kikuyu 1913 and argues that it was

amazing that “spheres of influence” or “comity arrangements” were themselves problematic, because they meant “negotiating religious boundaries with little regard for the wishes of Africans.” He goes on to give an example where the Anglicans were able to prevent the expansion of the Consolata Fathers into the trans-Tana region for some time, arguing that this was in the interests of Britain and the cause of Protestantism (Nthamburi 1995:11).

Secondly, it was a conference between societies and not churches. This goes against the modern understanding of ecumenical co-operation, which is primarily viewed as a movement seeking to promote mutual understanding and closer unity between the churches. In Kikuyu 1913, the whole idea of promoting mutual understanding between African churches was seen as a concern which would come after the missionary societies had established a federation or an alliance! Clearly, even though Church-related organisations can become involved in ecumenical activities or projects, they will necessarily uphold an ecclesial dimension overtly, and must make ecclesiology their starting point.

Thirdly, Kikuyu 1913 lacked unanimity even within the Protestant groups themselves. As noted above, the Westonian controversy left a big scar in the history of the ecumenical movement in East Africa; furthermore, as the various quarrels became increasingly vehement, they ended up both dividing and embarrassing the Church. Bishop Weston of Zanzibar could not understand how Anglicans could easily enter into fellowship with denominations that were non-Episcopal. At the other end of the theological spectrum, the African Inland Mission withdrew from the proposed federation because it, too, had a bone to pick with the rest. (The AIM could not understand how it could fit into a schema that was to include Anglo-Catholics whom, they felt, were not nearly Protestant enough. Indeed, at one stage, the AIM asked for permission to rebaptise Anglicans who attended Baptist churches and expressed such a wish (Nthamburi 1995:22)). They also requested that non-teetotallers be excluded from full membership of a united Church. Again, the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Seventh-Day Adventists withdrew their support for the federation between 1909 and 1913 (Mugambi 1998:12). As Wanyoike (1984:118) notes, one early aim of the missionary alliance, which culminated in Kikuyu 1913, was to found a college at Kikuyu where they could educate their local adherents who would be engaged in evangelism, teaching and hospital work. Curiously, the “too evangelical” AIM, which could have been expected to support the idea of ecumenical co-operation (given that it was among the original founder missions of the federation, noted above) had certain misgivings. As Capon writes:

... the A.I.M did not see how there can be real and workable union in a united college in Kenya unless the Societies in the

Alliance agree to send out to Kenya as missionaries those who hold the conservative evangelical position (Capon, quoted in Wanyoike 1984:118).

The lack of unanimity is further compounded by the fact that, even in the Church of England, those who considered themselves “Conservative Evangelicals” had always disputed the position of other members of the same Church who regarded themselves as “Liberal Evangelicals.” Why? The Conservatives held that the theological positions of the liberals was faulty – because it “lead[s] to weakened regard for the authority and the trustworthiness of the Holy Scripture, and special apprehension has been felt because they raise the question of our Lord’s own endorsement of that authority and the manner in which His words are to be regarded” (Hooton quoted in Wanyoike 1984:120). And, as Capon summed it all up, the theological conflict among the mission societies was

greater conflict even than in the Reformation... the A.I.M made it quite clear that they had no desire for that kind of comprehensive union. So in effect they dealt the death blow to the great ideal of the Alliance. It had been foreshadowed in 1918. The *coup de grace* was administered in 1922 (Capon, quoted in Wanyoike 1984:120-121).

After 1922 AIM withdrew all its formal connections with the missionary Alliance, and associated with other missions only when it experienced external pressures (especially from secular sources), when missions were compelled by circumstances to speak in one voice.

Fourth, the largest single denomination, the Catholic Church, did not participate in these early initiatives. This reduced the early stages of ecumenical initiatives in the British East Africa to a merely Protestant affair. Suspicions between Catholics and Protestants continued to dog these noble initiatives until Vatican II, when, for the first time, Catholics were allowed to cooperate with people from other Christian denominations. In these early stages of ecumenical initiatives by the Protestants, sentiments on the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation were rife and, in turn, encouraged further divisions among both the Protestants and the Catholics (Mugambi 1998:11).

Clearly, any strict observance of spheres made it certain that large numbers of Christian travellers would remain without access to the ministrations of their own churches. This realisation made it hard for anyone to reject the whole scheme of ecumenical co-operation, simply because travelling Christians would always seek communion from ministers of other denominations. Nevertheless, this realisation had some painful implications

to the various missionary societies in the then British East Africa. To the Anglicans, for instance, to accept the principle of ecumenical co-operation was to “call in question the whole basis of an episcopally ordained ministry” (Oliver 1952:226). Nevertheless, and as it turned out, among the Anglicans, rules were laid down for the reception at the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in any mission of visiting communicants from other missions, and this practice was upheld by the Central Consultative Body of Lambeth against Bishop Weston’s contention that the Sacrament could only be administered to such as were “ready and desirous to be confirmed”. At the same time, other missions were bound to administer the Sacrament to visiting Anglican communicants (Oliver 1952:226).

Despite these shortcomings, Kikuyu 1913 remains a landmark in the ecumenical movement among the Protestant churches of the world, a movement which has “been perhaps the most persistent feature of the ecclesiastical history of the twentieth century” (Oliver 1952:222). Certainly, Kikuyu 1913 raised issues which were of global concern, and which have profoundly influenced all later schemes for union between Episcopal and non-Episcopal churches. It is appropriate, therefore, to acknowledge the almost parochial problems out of which the movement arose. It is important to remember that the territory that was the focus of the Kikuyu 1913 proposals was, from the point of view of Christian evangelism, the least advanced of the mission-fields of East Africa. The number of African Christians affected by its proposals, at the time, was less than 5 000. (This group of people, as noted above, had no voice in the conference proceedings.) The need for this ecumenical initiative arose solely from the uncomfortable proximity of European missions of diverse denominational backgrounds operating within the “delectable highland region between Nairobi and Kisumu” (Oliver 1952:223).

#### **Was Kikuyu 1913 a success story?**

Despite its shortcomings, Kikuyu 1913 remains a historical landmark that has had memorable, long-lasting and positive results that are clearly evident now, nearly 100 years later. Although total unity among the founder missions or their resultant African churches has never been achieved, Kikuyu 1913 did establish a precedent for Church unity efforts which has been a prominent feature in the East African Protestant field to date. The presence of the mission societies themselves, competing for the souls of Africa, was itself a partial fulfilment of the dream of a pioneer missionary to East Africa, Ludwig Krapf, who had a vision for the future of the work which he had just begun, where he saw “a chain of mission stations stretching right across Africa from the east to the west coasts” (Wanyoike 1984:111). Accordingly, Krapf saw an African Church “with a black bishop and black clergy” and felt that this



would eventually be the necessary key “in the civilization of Africa” (Wanypole 1984:111). Despite its total lack of black representation, the ball was set rolling and, eventually, Krapf’s dream was largely realised.

In particular, the fact that, after Kikuyu 1913, an “Alliance of Missions” was formed speaks volumes about the success of the Conference. The Alliance was subsequently able to make huge achievements, such as the joint establishment of a Divinity School, St Pauls United Theological College, 1930 (currently St Paul’s University, Limuru); the establishment of Alliance High School in 1926; the inauguration of the Christian Council of Kenya, 1943, and its subsequent transformation to NCCCK in 1963, with John Kamau as the first African General Secretary; and the merger between Gospel Mission Society and the Church of Scotland Mission in 1934. The mere fact that the Federation of Missions that came out of the Kikuyu 1913 went on to become the Alliance of Missions shows that all was not in vain, and that Christ’s prayer for Church unity did not pass unnoticed. As Wanyoike (1984:115) perceptively notes, this Alliance of Missions

laid the ground-work of mission and church co-operation. Ideally, the Alliance aimed at co-operation in all areas of its work but because of practical difficulties not all its goals were reached. Under several Boards established by the Alliance, post-elementary education, medical and social activities, as well as preaching work were co-ordinated in several centres. The Church of Scotland Mission had hospitals in Kikuyu, Tumutumu, and Chogoria, while the A.I.M had another at Kijabe. A women’s rescue home was started at Dagoretti in 1923 which was named the Alliance Women’s Industrial Home. This project did not prove very successful but it did demonstrate the determination of the Alliance to be comprehensive in its aspirations. Perhaps the shining example of its efforts was to be found in its institutions of post-elementary schools of training.

Theologically, the success of Kikuyu 1913 can be attested when one considers following points. Firstly, Kikuyu 1913 attempted to attest to the fact that the Church is a fellowship (*koinonia*). From the outset, Jesus desired to found a new community, the true Israel of God. It was to be a *koinonia* prepared for the kingdom of God. To this end, the entire ministry of Jesus as depicted in the synoptic Gospels develops the idea of the Church as a communion or fellowship gathered around the person of Christ. In seeking a federation or an alliance of mission societies which culminated in the founding of churches, Kikuyu 1913 was a move in the direction of *koinonia*.

Secondly, in its emphasis on evangelism (especially among the members of AIM), Kikuyu 1913 became a forum of reinforcing the fact that the Church is a worshipping community. The second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles shows the ancient Church as being characterised by fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. The constitutive factor in this *koinonia* is the apostolic message (*kerygma*). In turn, the Church has to be appreciated as a proclaiming institution. St Paul puts it well when he says, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power (*Dunamis*) of God to all who believe – Jews or Gentiles” (Romans 1:16).

Third, the Westonian and other doctrinal controversies which dogged Kikuyu 1913 need not be construed to mean that the conference was an embarrassment to the whole idea of Church unity. Instead, it should be understood from the viewpoint that the Church had come of age and was able to re-assess itself in the light of its doctrinal orientations through healthy debate. Historically, the Church has tended to coalesce towards statism, and the Kikuyu 1913 controversies are no exception. Nevertheless, at different times, the Church as a living body has refused to remain static for any length of time and has constantly moved towards dynamism. The case of the sixteenth century Reformation is a case in point, a clear example of the Church choosing dynamism over statism. Seen in this way, Kikuyu 1913 was an important milestone in the history of the ecumenical movement.

#### **From Kikuyu 1913 to NCKC**

The Kikuyu Conference of 1913 was an important highlight in the development of ecumenism in Eastern Africa “as a significant forerunner of many contemporary initiatives and insights” (Mugambi 1998:11). It was followed by the second major Missionary Conference, popularly called Kikuyu 1918, which took place at the end of the First World War (1914-1918). In attendance were government officials and a few prominent settlers. The Federation admitted its fifth member, the British and Foreign Bible Society (today the Bible Society of Kenya). The name of the Federation changed to the Alliance of Protestant Missions. In 1924, a more representative body was created to take over the work of the Alliance, the Kenya Missionary Council (KMC). In 1943, the KMC changed its name to the Christian Council of Kenya (CCK) in order to accommodate non-missionary organisations. In 1966, CCK changed its name and became the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCKC) to reflect its national outlook. In 1984, the name changed yet again to the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), indicating that membership of the Council was by way of churches and organisations and not individual Christians (Anderson 1984:223).

In turn, it is vital to appreciate that the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) is a fellowship of Protestant churches and Christian

organisations that are registered in Kenya. According to their website ([www.nckk.org](http://www.nckk.org)), NCKK provides a forum for member churches and organisations to act on common issues:

To support and sharpen each other in service and Christian witness. Through NCKK, the membership seeks to facilitate the attainment of a united, just, peaceful and sustainable society. The normal day to day work of evangelism, teaching and pastoral care is carried out by the member churches and organisations.<sup>9</sup>

In various forums, NCKK engages in national debates, especially over issues such as constitutionalism, human rights, minority rights, gender disparities, and HIV/AIDS. Politically, NCKK compares with the Roman Catholic's Justice and Peace Commission, which acts as the political wing of the Church. In short, NCKK has variously acted as the conscience of the nation, especially in 1988, when it fiercely opposed the massive rigging of the national elections. The NCKK was, however, severely criticised in 1997, when most of its leaders allegedly took sides during the national elections (on tribal lines). As a result, the Council turned out to be the worthless salt described in Matthew 5:13.

In other words, the Council lost its moral authority to guide the nation, especially after its spokesperson, the Rev Mutava Musyimi, resigned and joined the government-leaning party (Party of National Unity), contested the elections and subsequently won the Gachoka parliamentary seat (during the 2007 general elections). Perhaps, thus, the silence of the once vocal Council of Churches following the defeat of the then ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU) in 2002, and seemingly being seen as supportive of the new regime under President Mwai Kibaki, badly scandalised the Council. As a result, the Council was forced to watch as the nation became polarised into tribal fiefdoms, thereby making it very difficult for Kenya to hold free and fair elections. Consequently, the preceding December 27, 2007 election, which was hotly contested between the incumbent Mwai Kibaki of Party of National Unity (PNU) and Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), resulted in massive violence and displacements that left over 300 000 homeless, led to over one thousand people killed, injuries, rapes, and a trauma hitherto unknown in post independent Kenya. The election was widely seen as lacking credibility, yet the Council could not effectively provide its once prophetic voice, simply because at least some of its leaders were compromised. Nevertheless, NCKK's role is critical in the socio-

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<sup>9</sup>[http://www.nckk.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=37&Itemid=56](http://www.nckk.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=37&Itemid=56) [Accessed 22 Nov 2009]

economically polarised Kenya of the twenty-first century, and its role as a beacon that can map out the direction for Kenyan society cannot be ignored. In short, Bishop Willis's dream of a united Church in East Africa has by no means entirely faded away. In short, Kikuyu 1913 has left East African Christianity a rich legacy.

### **Conclusion**

The article has explored the nature, the concerns and the progress of the Kikuyu 1913 Conference, which was held at the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), Thogoto, Kikuyu, in the buildings of the current Church of the Torch, Thogoto, Kikuyu – Kenya. It has attempted to establish the purpose of the conference as the desire to work out unifying arrangements for the less than a dozen mission societies that operated in British East Africa, as Kenya was then called. The article established the fact that the conference had twofold objective: namely, to promote a federation of missions and to foster a United Native Church, though the latter was not explored in full. As it turned out, the Westonian controversy concerning the administration of the Holy Eucharist and other socio-doctrinal disagreements dogged the progression of the meeting to the extent of seemingly overshadowing the noble goal of ecumenical co-operation in the then British East Africa. However, the Conference's success can be demonstrated by the fact that it set the pace of ecumenism through the establishment of various Protestant bodies such as the Christian Council of (churches of) Kenya of 1943 – which later became the current National Council of Churches, with John Kamau as the first African General Secretary (in 1963). To this end, the role of Arthur, Peel, Willis, Maclean, Hamshere, Scott and others – as the pioneer leading advocates of ecumenical co-operation in East Africa – has to be acknowledged.

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