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One of the most fortunate and profound experiences of my life was growing up for eight years in Sierra Leone, West Africa. As a child, naïve and unconcerned with things like “culture shock” or “missiology,” I simply took for granted my new environment and loved it. Without trying, I learned the national lingua franca called Krio, gobbled up large plates of rice with sauce made from cassava or potato leaves, switched sports from American football to “futbol,” memorized the national anthem (ok, only the first verse) and learned to watch out for driver ants. Yet my African experience was a privileged one in comparison to my friends. I was shielded from many of the realities of the African experience known to them.

In the capital city of Freetown stands a massive cottonwood tree that serves as a roundabout in the old city center, towering above its surroundings. It is at least two hundred years old and has an African experience that goes far beyond my own. Myth and legend surround the tree. I was told that the iron posts still visible in the tree were used to chain people there during the days of slavery. It is said that the first group of returned slaves (thus “Freetown”) gathered around the tree upon arrival in 1792 and sang,

Awake and sing of Moses and the Lamb  
Wake! every heart and every tongue  
To praise the Saviour's name  
The day of Jubilee is come;  
Return ye ransomed sinners home.

Whatever the specifics actually were, it would be a true marvel if the cottonwood tree could talk. It has been a silent wit-

ness to early indigenous culture, the ravages of slavery, the colonial power-grab and resultant rebellions, the laughable division of Africa into the present geopolitical nations at the Berlin Conference in 1884, the struggle for national independence, a brutal civil war and the present fragile peace and attempt at rebuilding. The tree has witnessed, in microcosm, the troubling history of the entire continent in the modern period.

Africa continues to struggle for its identity. Like a child born from the rape of a stranger, it has been indelibly marked by the imperialism of the last centuries. A “pure” African identity is impossible to recover. The damage has been done. The child has been born and she doesn't look like her mother. The question haunting Africa now is, “What is the way forward?” Countless books have been written on the African dilemma, and yet the stark realities remain. While educated elites debate the issues, the African on the ground is left to deal with daily realities.

Where does the Christian mission movement fit into the discussion on Africa? After all, we came on the scene as part of an unholy and often contentious alliance with colonial powers and their more commercial concerns. It has been said that eighty percent of the schools and hospitals in Africa were built by missionaries. And for every sordid tale of arrogant missionary practice, there are other stories of incredible compassion and sacrifice that fill our missionary biographies. The sharing of the gospel in Africa left a mixed bag of results that are still seen today. But that is the past. What is the role of the mission enterprise in today's Africa? Well, the mission

enterprise at work in Africa today is no longer predominately Western. Africans have their own ideas and always have.

One senses that while the Western world wrings its hands over Africa's predicament and struggles to bear the “white man's burden,” Africans themselves have gone ahead of us. Africa, while still experiencing less obvious forms of Western imperialism, is now largely in the hands of Africans. This is a new reality. Most African states are only around fifty years old, a very short time in the lifespan of a nation. And much of the last fifty years has been a wilderness experience, as these newly “independent” nations have found it difficult to wear Saul's armor. But there have always been and continue to be in increasing measure African Davids who are showing up and doing their own thing. We do not think they have nearly enough to get the job done, but giants are beginning to fall. The MANI conference covered in this issue is but one example of the many encouraging initiatives coming from Africa.

In the end, Africans will write the story of Africa. It is a story forged between the two extremes of unrivaled potential on one hand and unprecedented problems on the other. If the cottonwood tree remains standing for another two hundred years, what will it witness? While it may be hard for some to conceive, Africa could be a world-power by then. But however the larger story unfolds, as biblical faith continues to express itself authentically in African form through African initiative, there will be many good chapters worth reading, both for the glory of God and the good of the people. <sup>f</sup>