

**Living the Gospel in Haiti with *Konbit*:
The Intersection of the Gospel and Culture for a Responsive and Responsible Church.**

By

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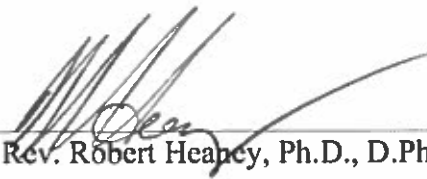
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Abstract

In Haiti, the relationship between Gospel and culture tends to disrupt relationships and even communities, portraying a church that is more French than Haitian. It is often argued on the account of the Bible that once becoming a Christian, everything old has passed away and everything has become new to the extent of rejecting Haitian culture. However, in Haitian culture there are elements which can bridge the gap between Gospel and culture, and consequently bring people together and strengthen communities. The term “*konbit*,” defined as an “event” where the community comes together to accomplish something to the benefit of one member of their community or the community at large, is a concept/event that can bring about this theological task. Therefore, I am writing on the topic of “Living the Gospel in Haiti with *konbit*,” because I want to find out how God is calling the church in Haiti to bear witness to the Gospel together with the culture and the local context. This research will be grounded in a Trinitarian understanding of God and will take into account the modern missionary movement’s theory that the church does not have a mission but rather God’s mission has a church. With that in mind, I argue that the church in Haiti needs to reimagine herself by not seeing the culture as an enemy but rather engaging with it in different ways that seek to witness to God’s love for all people. The same event of *konbit* that brings bread and wine for the Eucharist is able to help reimagine the work of the church in Haiti.

To my mother Vilanie Pierre, my father Franck Pierre Louis, and my two late grandmothers
Irmaine Joseph and Ilarienne Fontus who have gone to be with the Lord.

Together, they are the suns that make my days bright
and the stars that illuminate my nights.

Contents

Acknowledgments	6
Introduction	8
Chapter 1: The Clash between the Gospel the Culture and its Consequences.....	12
Untold and Neglected Stories	12
Syncretism and Creolization	14
The Need for a Bicultural Church	16
Coping with the Consequences.....	18
Chapter 2: A Theological Exploration of <i>Konbit</i>	21
An Exploration of <i>Konbit</i>	21
The Haitian Church in <i>konbit</i> with the Culture	22
The Guest-Host Dynamic in Luke 10:1-12.....	24
The Gospel in <i>konbit</i>	26
Chapter 3: Toward a Haitian Theology for a Responsive and Responsible Church.....	28
Contextual Theology: Setting the Context	28
When Gospel and Culture Meet: The Translation Journey	30
The Harmony of the Hoe and the Gospel in <i>Konbit</i>	32
One Cup, One True Table, but Many Hands.....	33
Chapter 4: Transforming the Community: From the Earth to the Table.....	36
Towards New Critical Forms of Local Communities.....	36
Cultivating Transformational Communities: The Value of Leadership	39
The Art of the “Agricultural Work Party”	42
Conclusion	44
Bibliography.....	47

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Introduction

“There is no cultureless Gospel,” says the Native American educator and author Richard Twiss in *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way*.¹ When Jesus gave the Great Commission, or sent the 72, and when Paul traveled to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ, the idea was to take the *euangelion*, the Good News, to people wherever they were and in whatever culture or world view they inhabited. The case of Haiti, and many other parts of the world, departed from this original idea in the sense that colonialization, dominance, and exploitation were the “package” we received along with the Gospel and the Church. Today in Haiti, overarching questions remain about whether or not this good news has really reached the people.

This question is pertinent because the Church in Haiti is more European than Haitian. For example, 30 years ago one was not allowed to speak Creole in the Episcopal Cathedral of Holy Trinity. This situation brings to mind H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic, *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr sketches out different ways Christians have related to culture throughout history: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, and Christ transforming culture.² His categories lead me to ask if Christ is against the Haitian culture. If yes, I would argue that Christ is for the European culture, given that this is the culture the church of Haiti is promoting in terms of language, behavior, music, liturgy, and so on.

Even though Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon criticize Niebuhr’s categorizations as having too much to do with an imperialist view of Christianity, it is crucial to understand how the church relates to cultures and critically address these issues. Twiss’s assertions and Niebuhr’s

¹ Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015), 191.

² See Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

taxonomy show that there is a relationship between the church and the Gospel that needs to be examined. Twiss assumes that wherever the church goes, she will inevitably have to learn first in order to adapt her teaching and actions in a way that resonates with the people she seeks to serve. Niebuhr points out that the church can choose to learn or not. The refusal to learn mirrors the situation the church has experienced in Haiti from the time of slavery, through the time after independence, and until now.

There is a pressing need to study what the church has been doing in Haiti since the independence of Haiti in 1804. In 1860, Roman Catholicism was made the official religion by a concordat signed by the government of Haiti and the Vatican. One year later, in 1861, the Episcopal Church came to Haiti with an African American, James Theodore Holy. Diverse Protestant churches followed, and all of them were recognized as legal denominations. However, the question remains, to what extent did the church sit and learn the place and the context before engaging in missionary work?

The view of mission that the church held until the modern missionary movement was that the church has a mission to convert people and make disciples for Christ, trying to follow the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:16-20. The way the church has carried out this imperative has not revealed who God is. Instead, the modern missionary movement discovered that the church does not have a mission of her own, but rather that God has a mission in which God calls the church to participate. Recently, the modern missionary movement has tried to redeem the word “mission,” at least its theological significance, from the wrongdoings committed in the name of mission. In *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, John Flett writes, “*missio Dei* means first of all that

mission is God's work..... the church does not have a mission, she is missionary."³ Because the church has appropriated mission, she has, for the most part, neglected the image of God in local people and done very poorly in some places trying to convert but also to exploit land, people, and culture to the benefit of the superpowers. In a place like Haiti, this missionary work has been for the most part against that which is cultural, Haitian, local, and indigenous. Language is one of the elements the church is trying to avoid. Even the name for God is still debated. Most Protestants in Haiti will not say *Granmèt* or *Bondye*,—Creole names for God—and will never recite or not even know the Lord's Prayer in Creole, the local language, probably because these words sound too local. This belief led a group of people to use only the French name for God, *Dieu*, which they pronounce *Dye*, but does not mean anything in Creole.

Missionary work has also stripped Haitians of their identity in many ways. By condemning the culture and by instilling a mindset of dependence, it made people live in a state to constantly beg the *primum vivere*. This situation of mendicity and dependence will be addressed in the last part of this work. The Church caused a crisis of identity in the 1940s, a legacy that calls for lament in order to find forgiveness for the wrongdoings imposed on a peaceful nation. In *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, Colin Dayan states, "Since the land and the gods give the majority of Haitians their identity, it is not surprising that the taking of land was accompanied by what became known as the 'antisuperstition' campaign, also called *la renonce* (the act of revoking), led by the Catholic Church."⁴ Then, the call for lament starts by coming together; and one of the Haitian events that calls people together is *konbit*. Through *konbit*, I will

³ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2010), 37, 65.

⁴ Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 87-88.

try to analyze possible ways forward for the church in Haiti and to articulate a foundation of a Haitian theology.

In *When the Hands Are Many*, Jennie Marcelle Smith defines *konbit* and highlights its multiple aspects. “In many regions of the country and in many expatriate circles, the term *konbit* can evoke a sort of nostalgic romance, calling up images of old-timey ‘hand-in-hand’ cooperation and ‘heads-together’ community spirit.”⁵ *Konbit* is an event where people come together to accomplish something for one person or for the community. This gathering has the power to heal wounds because in *konbit* there is no distinction of religion, class, and economic situation. In and with *konbit*, I will lay down possible areas of discussion that the church can address in order to become more relevant to the context of Haiti and, consequently, help in the construction of a just and participatory society. To accomplish this task, the church needs to remember that she does not have a mission, but God’s mission has a church. God is a missionary God who sends people to transform, renew, and liberate but not to condemn and exploit. Flett argues, “The phrase ‘God is a missionary’ reduces God to a sending God.”⁶ Through this action of sending, articulated differently in Luke 10 and in the Great Commission, I will call the church to pay attention to context, place, culture, and expectation, where she can learn, eat, drink, and listen before acting.

⁵ Jennie Marcelle Smith, *When the Hands Are Many: Community Organization and Social Change in Rural Haiti* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 84.

⁶ Flett, *The Witness of God*, 36.

Chapter One

The Clash between the Gospel the Culture and its Consequences

Untold and Neglected Stories

In many ways, Haiti's current situation is well known: the Haitian revolution, the uncertainty that followed, the 2010 earthquake, and so on. However, deep within the Haitian reality lie stories, memories, and visions that are hidden either by a new form of colonialization or by a church that still wants to sound "European" by silencing everything that sounds "cultural." Leon-Francois Hoffman sees in this attitude what he calls "*francophilie*"⁷ that he attributed to the Haitian elites which vividly marks the church of Haiti.⁸ By suppressing everything that is Haitian and Creole, this attitude left the country with stories untold and neglected that theology could set to analyze anew. Thus, I believe that theologizing about my own context first requires a description of it. My concise description of the Haitian people is that we are like the tiny mustard seed that bears in its essence the fullness of the tree, where birds will come and perch in its branches. Whether or not someone values the mustard seed does not affect the seed itself. The seed is waiting for fertile ground in which to die and experience rebirth in a tree that will amaze human beings and animals alike.

On January 1, 1804, Haiti proclaimed its independence with Jean Jacques Dessalines as its new leader who called himself emperor. Celucien C. Joseph in his book, *Haitian Modernity and Liberative Interruptions: Discourse on Race, Religion and Freedom*, sees in this event "the beginning of new freedom story."⁹ Of course, the world knew about freedom, but Haiti brought about a new "freedom story" that disrupted, disappointed, disturbed. How could a group of black

⁷ Affinity toward French.

⁸ Hoffmann Léon-François, *Haiti: Couleurs, Croyances, Créole* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Editions H. Deschamps, 1990), 56.

⁹ Celucien L. Joseph, *Haitian Modernity and Liberative Interruptions: Discourse on Race, Religion, and Freedom* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2014), 18.

enslaved people, considered without a society, without religion, and without civilization, find strength in a togetherness that predated “*konbit*” and defeat the most powerful army at that time, the French Army, and consequently push the world to reconsider the enslaved stories and histories? This story is well known but not well understood and not valued. Thus, theologizing about Haiti requires considering these narratives anew.

Christianity entered this newborn nation. To say it fairly, Christianity was present in the colony and was imposed on the enslaved by their masters. How was the Christian church, once a tool in the hand of the oppressors to subject and subdue other people, able to re-accommodate herself¹⁰ and switch to a different discourse? Yes, re-accommodate and no longer say that God purposefully created black people as subjects of their masters. This is one of the misunderstood stories. How can the church reestablish herself in the culture, the black culture, and stop speaking the language of “high culture”¹¹ as Kathryn Tanner categorizes cultures?¹² That is part of the neglected story because until now the church has stood against Haitian culture instead of trying to understand it, and this position is deemed as normal.

Drawing from Tanner, what I call Haitian culture is the set of meaningful practices, beliefs values that give life meaning. Tanner defines culture as “the whole social practice of meaningful action and more specifically to the meaning dimension of such action—the beliefs, values, and orienting symbols that suffuse a whole way of life.”¹³ To cite one part of Haitian

¹⁰ In English both the pronoun “it” and “her” seem appropriate for the church, but in French, the church is feminine, “*une église*.” And it always portrays with this feminine mark. In Creole, noun has no genre. Even for man and woman, the same definite article is used. As I cannot adopt the Creole neutrality, I will use “her” for the church, as it is also congruent with the Gospel presenting the church as the bride of Christ.

¹¹ In her book, *Theories of Cultures*, Tanner identifies evaluative concepts of cultures and categorizes them as “High and modern,” high and anti-modern, nationalistic and developmental. In this work, I will build on Tanner for non-evaluative concepts of culture.

¹² Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 28.

¹³ Kathryn Tanner, “Cultural Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.

culture that is disappearing nowadays: the family gathering around a table, candlelight or a fire to tell folktales, riddles and proverbs that lift the heart after the scorching heat of the day. Children and adults laugh and play until sleep makes everybody drowsy in the silence of the night. Stories and folktales are powerful. They make life bearable and have the capability to transcend current situations. In my family, after hearing folktales and advice from my father, we pray. Prayers are the starting and ending point of the day: prayers not only for rain, for productive crops, but also prayers for freedom and liberation, economically, politically and, regarding this present work, culturally and religiously.

Why liberation after more than 200 years of independence? Joseph reminds us that the narrative of liberation that Haiti initiated is not yet complete in Haiti's own territory.¹⁴ He states, "Scholars continue to remind us that the Haitian Revolution is a narrative of liberation that is not yet fully complete in Haiti's own territory."¹⁵ The reasons that Haiti needs a second liberation are multifaceted and complicated. To have this second liberation there is a need for an interdisciplinary study. Two fields that will be considered in this work are religion and culture.

Syncretism and Creolization

The context of Haiti is largely marked by the ancestral religion called Vodou. Mulrain George MacDonald sees Vodou as an integral part of Haitian culture.¹⁶ The enslaved people brought this religion with them to the Caribbean after being uprooted from their homes in different parts of Africa. Despite inhuman living conditions, secrecy mingled with heart religion prevented them from letting go of their traditional beliefs. The Catholic Church throughout history has launched merciless wars against Vodou, killing their priests and destroying their

¹⁴ Joseph, *Haitian Modernity*, 18.

¹⁵ Joseph, *Haitian Modernity*, 18.

¹⁶ George MacDonald Mulrain, *Theology in Folk Culture: The Theological Significance of Haitian Folk Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1984), 6.

peristil,¹⁷ but nowadays, the Catholic Church of Haiti refrains from persecuting Vodou in this way. Instead the denigration of the Vodou religion continues by Protestants in Haiti who treat Vodou practitioners as “Satan worshippers” and even hold them responsible for Haiti’s plight. Is this the call the church has received? Is it the best way to “make disciples” in a country ruined by imperialism and colonialization?

In advocating for a fruitful encounter between religion and culture, there are a wide variety of issues to consider; among them, the issue of syncretism. Syncretism does not have a clear-cut definition among scholars due to its different types and degrees of manifestation. In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, Margarite and Paravisini-Gebert, define syncretism as “the active transformation through renegotiation, reorganization and redefinition of clashing beliefs systems.”¹⁸ Despite the negative connotation of syncretism, Fernández and Paravisini-Gebert build on the work of Andrew Apter to argue that syncretism is a form of resistance.¹⁹

When the Africans were brought from Africa to the Caribbean, their whole life required new adaptation. They were forced to practice the religions of their heart in secret and received Christianity in the harshest form imaginable. Syncretism thus was a de facto result. While the normal definition of syncretism in Haiti emphasizes the intermingling of Christianity and Vodou, syncretism tends only to consider one perspective. In her book, *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions*, Mozella Mitchell sees in syncretism an intermingling process that can be described differently. She states after Leslie Demangles that syncretism entails a kind of “symbiosis,” or a “creolization” phenomenon.²⁰

¹⁷ A *Peristil* is Vodou temple.

¹⁸ Margarite Olmos Fernández and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 7.

¹⁹ Fernández and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, 9.

²⁰ Mozella G. Mitchell, *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 42.

The two terms are so closely linked that they convey what has happened in the case of Haiti. Fernández and Paravisini-Gebert put creolization in the context of survival.²¹ When the nation was deprived of everything, stripped of humanness, integrity and even language, it created its own. Creolization is, in fact, the history of Haiti. Interestingly, Creole is the language spoken by 100% of Haitians. It is called Haitian Creole. Creole, when not referring to language, means a “shoot” that comes out of a stump and reflects the prophecy of Isaiah about Jesse and his son David. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isaiah 11:1).

Can the church be Creole? A Creole church means that the people of Haiti and the church are rising like a shoot from the grave of colonialization, dehumanization, and oppression to construct their own life, to build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat what they produce, to repeat the prophesy of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:5).

The church has been French for too long with all her *francophilie*. The Church of Haiti, if she studies and understands the context of Haitian people, needs to jointly investigate the benefit of mutual discovery with the culture in order to see and observe anew both the phenomenon of syncretism and creolization, to observe and harmonized her action through learning discernment, and to discern what God is calling the church to do, to say and to see.

The Need for a Bicultural Church

Very often, the church has a counter-testimony. Instead of bringing “Good News,” she brings the opposite. Twiss states: “rather than *good news*, the ‘Good News’ story remains highly ineffective among Native people and for many, it means *bad news*.”²² Twiss, a Native American,

²¹ Fernández and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, 4.

²² Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*, 25.

goes on to quote Lesslie Newbigin expressing the liminality of North American culture and the efforts of Native Americans to adopt, adapt and assimilate the Euro-American culture in order to create their own and to survive the “genocidal colonialization” done with the Bible in hand.²³ In the same way the Gospel of Jesus Christ has not always been the *euangelion* for the Native American, it has not always been also for Haitian people. But what the “resistance” of the Native Americans yields is their heritage, a testimony that the Christian faith can be contextualized in order to speak the heart language of every people while staying true to the Gospel.

Haiti has a unique heritage that the church needs to consider, weigh, and value in order to adapt its proclamation and witness. In the same way Twiss is suggesting a new theological reflection for his community, I believe that Haiti needs this theological reflection to make sense of everything that colonialization bequeathed to us. Twiss would call this moving “from colonialization to contextualization.”²⁴ This set of Haitian heritage can have unexpected theological insights where the Church can help people grow from the rubble of fatalism to new energized and spirit-filled contextualization if they are thoroughly analyzed.

This work requires a bicultural church, a church that is in conversation with the language and customs of her surrounding environment. I borrow this notion of bicultural church from Darrel L. Guder’s edited book, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of Church in North America*. Guder contends: “There is no cultureless gospel... for this reason, the church is always bicultural, conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living toward the language and ethics of the gospel.”²⁵ Guder is aware of the danger that cultural interchange

²³ Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*, 199.

²⁴ Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*, 191.

²⁵ Darrell L. Guder, and Lois Barrett. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1998), 114.

between Christianity and culture can also go the other direction. He anticipates that it is a both-and process as the church lives in but not of the world.²⁶

The universality of the Gospel presupposes adaptation and translation, respect and willingness in order to affirm identity while not letting “the keeping of identity” undermine encounters and relationships. Paul was a Jew with the Jews and Gentile with the Gentiles, not because he did not take the Gospel seriously but in order to bring them to Christ. Bringing to Christ means to let them know Christ first. When Christ urged the disciples to make disciples throughout the world, this presupposes that the Gospel will work mutually with the culture.

In Haiti, the Church closes her door to what is Haitian and sympathizes with what is western, European and foreign while there could be a fair and productive encounter between the Gospel and Haitian culture. The consequences are disastrous: damaging witness, a crisis of identity, a problematic vision of God and the church.

Coping with the Consequences

The etymological definition of the word church presents an important characteristic that is significant for understanding the church in relation to its context. The church as *ekkaleo*, the verb from which *ekklesia* is derived in Greek, meaning “called out,” is called by God to meet God at unexpected places in the same way the Hebrews were called out of Egypt and met God where they didn’t imagine. The church of Haiti is called out, to walk and not be stagnated. She is called to walk with the Gospel to meet the culture instead of seeing everything in the culture as completely other than church.

How is the church of Haiti to cope with the consequences of this long misunderstanding with the culture and become bicultural? This task requires, at least in the scope of this work, two

²⁶ Guder, *Missional Church*, 114.

crucial steps: a vision of God and a description of the church's identity *vis-à-vis* the Haitian culture that *konbit* will help develop in the next chapter.

First, a vision of God. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin spent about 40 years in India where he confronted the challenge of talking about Jesus in a place where the name of Jesus had no more meaning than any other strange name.²⁷ In the Tamil language, people tried to explain who Jesus was by referring to him as a Satguru ("the true teacher") or an Avatar ("incarnation of God") or a Kadaival ("the transcendent God"). But all these names in themselves have some kind of limitation for explaining who Jesus is.²⁸ I refer to this reality in Asia in order to mention that, unlike India, in Haiti there is no question of who Jesus is, but the need to know who God is remains crucial.

Second, a vision of the church. The church in Haiti is still experiencing an identity crisis, as she still can't figure out how to be in the culture but not of the culture. The early Christians also needed to cope with the culture in which they were imbedded in order to thrive. Kwame Bediako, in his book *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, talks about the relationship of early Christians to the Graeco-Roman Empire. He says, "It was obvious, therefore, that if Christians of Graeco-Roman culture were to achieve any real measure of valid and settled identity, they needed to come to terms with the various facets of that culture from which they themselves had emerged."²⁹ The meaning of "come to terms" is multilayered, but what I am suggesting is that the Church of Haiti, like the early church, needs to understand and come to term with the culture in order to thrive and proclaim with confidence the Gospel of salvation. In the process of coming to terms

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction To The Theology Of Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 21.

²⁸ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 29.

²⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 16.

with the culture, one element or facet of Haitian culture that can bring this about is *konbit*, to which I shall now turn.

Chapter Two

A Theological Exploration of *Konbit*

An Exploration of *Konbit*

Having presented a few aspects of the clash between religion and culture in Haiti, mostly due to the pervasive “*Francophilie*,” the present task is to analyze a Haitian event, called *konbit*, which exemplifies how Haitian culture is not entirely counter-gospel.

Konbit is a Haitian “event” where the community comes together to work for the benefit of one member of the community or the community at large. Marcelle Smith describes *konbit* as an agricultural work party.³⁰ In this event, work, music, *istwa* (stories), and food come together to animate people with hope and kindle the shared sense of survival and interdependence. Beverly Bell, in *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*, sees in this work of exchange teams the means of survival found in planting and harvesting each other’s land. She states, “Haitians have always had to depend on each other for survival activities. In just one example, *konbit*, work exchange teams, have planted and harvested each other's land in fields and on rocky mountainsides for centuries.”³¹ Smith’s agricultural work party that encompasses the sense of a festival, mingled with Bell’s definition as survival activities, give *konbit* a mixed character to express the soul of a people whose tears and joys dwell constantly side-by-side.

Can this event of *konbit* be a bridge that helps free the Haitian Church from the effect of colonialization and coloniality? The early Christian church depicted in Acts 2 put property and resources together and relied on each other for survival as a new community with a new identity

³⁰ Smith, *When the Hands Are Many*, 52.

³¹ Beverly Bell and Edwidge Danticat, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 205.

under an oppressive empire. They constituted a new community that needed to strive for survival in the context of harsh dynamics of power and possessions. In “Cultural Encounter and Religious Expression,” David Power states, “He who wishes to proclaim God’s praise among a people must needs take on the ways in which it has sought to wrestle with...the constant struggle for power and possession which destroy community.”³² *Konbit*, in Haiti, is the expression and testimony of this struggle, which emphasizes the importance of family, group, and community but not the “buffered self,” as Charles Taylor would put it.³³ While the Church in Haiti stands against almost everything that is cultural, *konbit* appears to be a practical voice that keeps calling the church to challenge the disjunction between herself and the culture, hence, the suggestion to have a church in *konbit*.

The Haitian Church in *konbit* with the Culture

Konbit works well with the preposition “with” and suggests that something is done *with* people. This conveys the connection with a Haitian proverb: “*yon sèl wou pa fè mizik*,” translated as “the strike of a solitary hoe makes no music.”³⁴ *Konbit* does not make any sense and does not apply if one person is working alone. For *konbit* to happen, preliminary conditions need to be met: a group of people (no matter of age, sex, or moral status), a host, and a task. I recall myself as a young boy going to render back a *konbit* for my father and working with all kinds of people. Smith mentions that several dozen might attend the *konbit*.³⁵ There needs to be a host

³² David Power, “Cultural Encounter and Religious Expression,” in *Liturgy and Cultural Religious Traditions*, ed. Herman Schmidt and David Noel Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 109.

³³ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 30.

³⁴ Smith, *When the Hands Are Many*, 82.

³⁵ Smith, *When the Hands Are*, 84.

who is the *chêf konbit* (*konbit* director).³⁶ The host needs to take care of the workers offering them food, rum, and music to accomplish the task.

The guest-host dynamic that is at the core of the *konbit* is crucial for the church in general and her presence in Haiti in particular. Willie Jennings, in a talk he gave at Virginia Theological Seminary on October 8, 2019, stressed that we have witnessed a Christianity that only talks but never listens, a Christianity that always teaches and never learns.³⁷ Consequently, this form of Christianity is always the host wherever it goes and never the guest; sometimes she is an inelegant host. This is a Christianity that has nothing to learn from other cultures and other people; a Christianity that fails to study space, time and culture appropriately. In *The Christian Imagination*, Jennings describes this form of Christianity as follows: “Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality. It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logic, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities.”³⁸ Jennings is an African American. What he describes, East African J.N.K Mugambi calls, “cultural suicide.”³⁹ Mugambi states, “Cultural suicide whether imposed or voluntary can in no way promote Christian missionary activity.”⁴⁰ Interpreting Mugambi, I notice that colonial powers imposed a cultural suicide on Haiti during the time of slavery, but now, it is imposed internally and externally. There is a lack of willingness to let God be God and to be attentive to ways God might speak through the culture. Therefore, the church

³⁶ Smith, *When the Hands Are Many*, 84.

³⁷ Willie J. Jennings, “Renewing the Christian Imagination” (Lecture, Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, October 8, 2019).

³⁸ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

³⁹ J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational, 1995), 105.

⁴⁰ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 105.

and her actors need to study the culture and let both the Gospel and the church find expression in people's lives.

In Haiti, then, the church is called to let the Spirit move, to learn how to be a guest and host and take into consideration what it means to enter a space with a history, a past and a present, that constitute a pillar for a better witness to the Gospel of Christ. This presupposes a first step in which the church comes without any purse, bag, and sandals. What the church is invited to do is sit, eat, and drink and let the peace and grace it brings flow at the right time, as it is portrayed in the sending of the seventy in the Chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel.

The Guest-Host Dynamic in Luke 10:1-12

I have pondered the relationship between Jesus' first sending of the disciples strictly to the "house of Israel" and the Great Commission at the end of his earthly ministry directed to "all nations."⁴¹ The Church puts emphasis on the Great Commission, but I see in the first sending "at home" the features and procedures that need to direct the sending outside. In *Insights on Luke*, Charles R. Swindoll sees in the first sending, a *modus operandi* of the kingdom. He states, "From the very beginning of His ministry on earth, Jesus established a pattern that would become the *modus operandi* of the kingdom."⁴² That means primarily means that the kingdom works in certain ways that need to be discovered.

The *modus operandi* consisted of going to the mission empty-handed with no purse and probably with no sandals in reserve. In this image, Jesus is stressing the need to be vulnerable in going out. By contrast, the church has done the contrary and throughout history presented herself as all-knowing, all-containing and all-powerful. In *Many Colors, Cultural Intelligence from a*

⁴¹ Luke 10: 1-12; Matthew 28:16-20.

⁴² Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary Ser. V. 3 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2017), 285.

Changing Church, Soong-Chan Rah states, “The church came to be seen as a place of consumption.”⁴³ Rah was analyzing how even the “Ark-itecture” of the church was made to mimic the judgment of God in Noah’s time and, consequently, her aversion to the world portrayed as sinful and fallen.⁴⁴ Then, instead of having a church with little provisions, ready to eat, drink and learn, the church chose to adopt the contrary attitude.

The attitude adopted by the church could be called a God-like attitude. This situation reflects the God that Christianity has been preaching throughout history: omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. While this is true, Jennings challenges it as one of the reasons the church attributed to herself the characteristics she gives to God to whom she is a witness.⁴⁵ Jennings realizes that the incarnation presents a different picture of God—a God who is willing to learn from the human condition, willing to be vulnerable and weak. Jennings states: “We are so thankful that we do not have a baby Jesus who sits on his mother’s lap and say that I don’t need you, I don’t want your help because I am God.”⁴⁶ Thus, the characteristics of God that the Church has attributed to herself need to be nuanced and tempered by activities that God has done that show another side of Godself.

That is the *modus operandi* also shown when Jesus, sent by God, chooses to send seventy others to help with the harvest. This is a picture of God who is willing to be a guest in God’s own creation. Thus, the guest-host dynamic where help and understanding are at the foundation is crucial. Jesus could have done the work of sharing the good news himself, but engagement with and integration of humankind would convey an incarnate God less interactive and collaborative with human.

⁴³ Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 70.

⁴⁴ Rah, *Many Colors*, 69-70.

⁴⁵ Jennings, “Renewing the Christian Imagination.”

⁴⁶ Jennings, “Renewing the Christian Imagination.”

The Gospel in *konbit*

If Christ, God incarnate, wanted his disciples to learn, it becomes obvious that the church, wherever it goes, needs fruitful engagement and positive encounter in order to bear a more complete image of the God to whom she bears witness. The kind of engagement needed in Haiti is where the sending in Luke intersects with *konbit*. In the Gospel, the disciples are sent to work in a harvest that is not their own, eating and drinking whatever the host gives (Luke 12:7). The second time the verb eating is mentioned in the gospel is when the disciples are ready to share the grace of their presence and proclaim the kingdom: “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’ (Luke 12:8-9).”

Similarly, in *konbit*, the worker comes to work in a field that is not her/his own, where the host will provide food (mostly twice), and sometimes provide the guest a hoe to work. The worker comes vulnerable, hungry, and sometimes desolate, relying on the host to provide food and sometimes tools with which to work. However, s/he comes with the gift of presence and willingness to work. Beside the dynamic of guest-host, another dynamic of cost-gift appears to be one of the underlying principles of both the sending of the seventy and the event of *konbit*. Cost, here, does not mean money. Smith asserts that the food and drink that one is expecting from the host not a form of payment because accepting money from the host would make someone low; instead, *konbit* is an “extension of hospitality and a gesture of thanks for their ‘gift’ of labor.”⁴⁷ The gift of labor and the cost of vulnerability also stand as a *modus operandi* for the church of Haiti to understand the field in which she is called to stay, eat, drink, and share the gift of her presence.

⁴⁷ Smith, *When the Hands Are Many*, 86.

This chapter represents an attempt to contextualize the interaction of the church with a land that is still waiting for a true evangelization. Rah describes this engagement as a process of externalization, objectification, and internalization where the collective is formed first by the recognition of individual experiences and values that affect the system (internalization).⁴⁸ I understand affecting and shaping the system as healing the sick, proclaiming the kingdom that was possible only when the disciples had already sat to externalize and objectify. By the same token, Jean-Marc Ela gives the method of doing that by asking if a complete reexamination from the sources (from the origin of Christianity) is not key to witness a more practical Gospel. He asks, “Must Christianity not be reexamined at its source in order to rediscover and bring down to the present the prophetic kernel of the gospel?”⁴⁹ In the context of Haiti, this rediscovering and this practicality should pass through the relevance of the church helping to address some social issues: impoverishment, disengagement, education, conflict of class, and so on. But her actions are to be undertaken in the context of a Haitian theology addressing what it means to be human, Christian, and Haitian.

⁴⁸ Rah, *Many Colors*, 35-37.

⁴⁹ Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 50.

Chapter Three

Toward a Haitian Theology for a Responsive and Responsible Church.

Contextual Theology: Setting the Context

Theology is always contextual. After World War II, attention to context fueled theology, laying the foundation for the work of the Second Vatican Council. The civil rights movements in America and elsewhere gave birth to a theology that embraces people at the margins: black, immigrants, women, and so on. Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* in 1973 is considered a masterpiece and a starting point for theology in the South that would give rise to Liberation Theology emerging from contexts of oppression. Thus, context remains the fuel that powered theology.

Without the gospel, these theologies would have been mere social environmental experiments where the social context of a group of people would be the only lenses to support theological reflection. In *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, Kwame Bediako states, "All expressions of contextual theology in the South are essentially missionary theologies, arising out of efforts to let the gospel encounter the reality of the South in all its complexities."⁵⁰ The relationship between the word of God and the context can be portrayed through the analogy of wearing glasses. The lenses are the culture we inhabit through which we see the reality and also the Gospel, but these lenses need a frame, which is the context. Without the frame or the context, we would awkwardly hold our glasses with our fingers. To stress the limit of the analogy, I build on Paul to say that through this lens we see dimly, darkly or in part as in a mirror because the analogy does not mean that the Gospel is dependent on the context; it is just another way to stress its universality as willing to be translated in a particular place and culture. Bediako states,

⁵⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 112.

“The Lord’s words are to be taken as stressing the universality of the good news conveyed in terms in which the disciple would have understood the world.”⁵¹ Then, the constant correlation of God’s word and the context make the content for promising and sound theology.

Consequently, in Haiti, the context of constant political, social, and economic crises provides the frame within which the Bible should be understood in this agricultural society. However, contexts are complex and do not have one single interpretation. While Haiti is marked by its turbulence, it is also marked by a people full of hope, energy, and faith. Haitians are a people who are not willing to be crumpled under oppression and injustice but are struggling to rise up and resist the conditions in which they are condemned to live. Theology starts there: with people. Because it starts with people, in order for theology to be understandable, it needs translatability. In *Whose Religion is Christianity*, Lamin Sanneh observes that compared to a religion like Islam, where the Quran is the Quran only in Arabic, Christianity is Christianity by the very act of translatability, where the Bible is expected to be translated to the heart language of the hearers.⁵² The kind of translatability that Sanneh is addressing is something that surpasses mere translations of the Bible and the liturgy. It is Christianity itself that needs to be translated. As John S. Pobee puts it, “There is need to translate Christianity into genuine African categories.”⁵³ To translate Christianity is two-fold according to Sanneh’s description of translation. He says, “Translation is the church’s birthmark as well as its missionary

⁵¹ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 164.

⁵² Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 252-258.

⁵³ John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 18.

benchmark.”⁵⁴ I am wondering whether the church in Haiti has a birthmark or a benchmark. These marks are possible only when the gospel is willing to meet the culture.

When Gospel and Culture Meet: The Translation Journey

From its origins, Christianity has been a religion on the move. This continual movement means Christianity assumes new mechanisms and methodologies in and through translation. Sanneh notes, “Christianity is a translated religion without a revealed language.”⁵⁵ With Sanneh, I want to say that the religion and its message find a language, a home and a culture where the Spirit sends it. Even though there is no revealed language, there is a working language, a language of engagement. This leads to a theology of engagement that stems from fruitful encounters of the gospel and the culture, addressing current issues of injustice, oppression, race, impoverishment, and suffering. In order to positively address people’s concern in the here and now, Christianity must be rooted in communities and translated into the languages of the people. The Christian enterprise must work in their farms, eat their food, listen to their stories, understand their accents and repent of the evil that has been done and is still underway in its name. That is imperative. In *A Theology of Engagement*, Ian Markham states, “Part of the repentance must involve a recognition of the contextual nature of all theology. Theology is rooted in communities. It is expressed in language. It is lived in lives. To ignore this dimension to theology is to ignore its power.”⁵⁶ Markham was addressing black and feminist perspectives that need to be taken into our new way of theologizing in order to challenge current issues of oppression, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Markham also help us to tackle the theology of

⁵⁴ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003), 97.

⁵⁵ Sanneh, *Whose Religion*, 97.

⁵⁶ Ian S. Markham, *A Theology of Engagement* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 102.

complicity in order to contextualize and even modify our Christology and our understanding of God.⁵⁷ Markham's translation calls first for recognition of the context.

Sanneh links the notion of translation with "renewal," and Markham sees in it a force, a power. Consequently, fruitful encounters between aspects of Haitian culture (the creole language, for example) and the Gospel will generate renewal and power. Encounters with the rural culture, in particular, will produce renewal that will help see Haiti anew and also serve as an internal force to better organize a nation that is solely represented by its dysfunctional capital city. In "Standstill in Haiti," Chris Herlinger writes, "If you judged Haiti solely through the lens of Port-au-Prince, you might conclude that Haiti is hopeless. I don't think that is true; I met too many talented, committed and politically savvy Haitians to believe that."⁵⁸ When Port-au-Prince is the only place featured in the media, it is not surprising that people think that this country is doomed. But when visiting the agricultural countryside, one encounters a reality that cannot and should not be overlooked. A theology of engagement, where the Gospel meets the culture, will be cognizant of the lived reality of people instead of standing as an outsider to the rural and urban experience. And by integrating the experience of all Haitians, speaking the language, the church will be better equipped to address issues like violence against women, poverty and oppression, excessive youth migration, human rights, and decentralization. By shifting the focus from the disordered capital city, we come to the place where the gathering of hoes makes music: the countryside.

⁵⁷ Markham, *A Theology of Engagement*, 87, 96, 103.

⁵⁸ Chris Herlinger, "Standstill in Haiti," *Christian Century* (August 24, 2010): 29.

The Harmony of the Hoe and the Gospel in *Konbit*

A Haitian theology, which takes into account the Haitian communitarianism that is still alive among the peasants, needs to start in the countryside. There, an agricultural framework of doing theology may beget a critical analysis of life in the countryside. For example, the tools Haitians use to farm are still the rudimentary ones that somehow prevent them from growing crops efficiently and sufficiently. The hoe, the machete, and other manual tools make farming strenuous and arduous. However, it is rare to find someone who plows her/his plot of land alone. There are common sayings such as *youn ede lòt*, literally meaning “one helps the other,” connected with another saying, *vwazinay se fanmi*, literally meaning, “neighbors are family,” where the burdens of everyday life are shared. These sayings resonate with the Gospel and constitute the ground from which an engaged theology can spring.

Is this sharing of burdens not what Paul commanded Christians from Galatia to do? “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). At that point in the Epistle, Paul was giving final instructions and exhorting Galatians to live in community. This was for Paul a new way of fulfilling the law, in community, helping one other. By using the Greek verb *barē* and *phortion*, meaning burden, he differentiates between manageable and troublesome burdens. We are called to carry one other’s burdens while Christ himself is carrying burdens that are too heavy for us.

The burden in Paul’s letter should not be seen as an afflicted load forcefully imposed on someone’s back because one is in the community. It has the sense of Haitians’ sharing of labor where the sense of community stems not only from hardship and a constraining situation, but also from the heart. From the heart of Haitian people are practices and sayings that resonate with the Christian message and should not go unnoticed. Smith writes:

But the prioritization of collective labor in rural Haitian agriculture emerges not only from material and economic concerns. It also reflects a larger commitment to sharing labor and resources that go well beyond pragmatic interests, and comprises one of the very foundations of rural Haitian culture.⁵⁹

The sharing of labor even bears the most common saying in Haitian culture: *travay se libète*, which means “work is freedom.”⁶⁰

Thus, when the Gospel of Christ works alongside the culture, crops of justice, peace, and freedom can be harvested. The church will not preach resignation, fate, and fatality as it is now. But the church will work alongside people to ameliorate their life and still stay authentic to the meaning and purpose of existence Haitians carry in their hearts. Pobee states, “Theology presupposes the convictions of people with regard to the meaning and purpose of life and human existence.”⁶¹ Without the knowledge of the heart desire, heart language, and aspiration of life and community, the work of the church will still reflect the tendency to obliterate the “barbarity” expecting to “civilize” the heathen. On the contrary, when the church learns from and eats and drinks with the people, renewal of lives can happen. Besides sharing the local food of the people, the church has her own food to offer also: the Eucharist.

One Cup, One True Table, but Many Hands

How is the Eucharist informative and transformative of Haitian theology, and how might the Church be the incubator for action and transformation? One way of supporting transformation is by analyzing the table of Jesus through the lens of post-colonial theology. This post-colonial theology that emerged in the 1970s offers a mirror to see when the table needs to be overthrown and the moneychangers made uncomfortable and when the table needs to be

⁵⁹ Smith, *When the Hands Are Many*, 72.

⁶⁰ This creole saying translated as “work is freedom,” is to be differentiated with the slogan at the entrance of the Auschwitz concentration camp *Arbeit macht frei*, “work sets you free.”

⁶¹ Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, 28.

settled with people gathered around to share transformational food. The timing for overflowing or setting the table is determined by the work of contextualization discussed above. For Robert Heaney, contextualization is contestation. In *Post-Colonial Theology: Finding God and Each Other Amidst the Hate*, Heaney analyses John Mbiti's eschatology of the Akamba community and states, "Contextualization, therefore, cannot be seen as a one-way process of inculturating an imported gospel. Contextualization is contestation."⁶² It is interesting that Heaney titles his chapter, "Things Fall Apart," acknowledging that the strength of particularity, contextualization mingled with lament and practical theology, can beget both death and birth of a new era.⁶³ The fall of the moneychanger's table and the rise of the table of justice and love to solidify a suffering nation, which longs to rise from the rubble of colonialism and coloniality.

It is not without reason that Jesus overthrew tables before sitting at the true table with his disciples to eat the last supper. The shared table becomes the connection between suffering and deliverance, holy and the profane, brokenness and wholeness, and, most importantly, materiality and spirituality. As the Akamba (John Mbiti's people) are also suffering, Heaney writes, "The potency of the sacraments for the Akamba that suffered from acculturating practices separated materiality from spirituality is further seen in the Eucharist."⁶⁴ Heaney goes on to quote Mbiti, saying that "the sacraments form the nexus between the physical and the spiritual world and through the concrete and material realities."⁶⁵ Thus, I conclude this chapter with the focus on a sacramental theology that should take into account both the spirituality and materiality of Haitian people into account through the table as the connection. This relationship between the material and immaterial can be an aspect of *konbit* that is drawn out and connected to a refreshed

⁶² Robert Stewart Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology: Finding God and Each Other Amidst the Hate* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), 50.

⁶³ Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology*, 42.

⁶⁴ Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology*, 54.

⁶⁵ Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology*, 54.

approach to culture by Haitian Christian theology? This will open my next point that centers on both the material and spiritual side trying to address the theme of community in Haiti grounded in the earth, in agriculture and the need for critical thinking.

Chapter Four

Transforming the Community: From the Earth to the Table

Towards New Critical Forms of Local Communities

Issues relating to religion and culture carry deep implications for the concerned group. At this point, the audience is crucial. I am not writing primarily to inform others about positive aspects of Haitian communitarianism. This will be seen as underlying evidence. I am addressing how the community can be critical of itself. This last part will focus on a critical analysis of the church and the culture in Haiti where both are invited to engage in a rethinking by stressing notions of spirituality “of the agricultural work party” and leadership in order to open up ways forward.

Moving forward requires a vision of community embedded in how the world is seen spiritually. Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age* that the world has been disenchanted.⁶⁶ In “disenchanted,” Charles Smith, an interpreter of Taylor, sees a “world de-charged of transcendence.”⁶⁷ On the contrary, Haiti has not been disenchanted. In *Prayers of African Religion*, John Mbiti makes the counter-argument that “man here treats nature as personal and intelligent; he personifies it in order to be able to communicate with it; solicits its help and even orders it about for his own welfare.”⁶⁸ In Haiti also, religion, and for the most part the Church, constitutes a significant entity in the Haitian society alongside nature. Any way forward on the part of the Church needs to address how the church sees itself in an agricultural society and analyzes in depth what has gone wrong and what we can redress. To redress means that we need to first acknowledge failures; the failure to carry out the Gospel of salvation and liberation to

⁶⁶ Smith, *Secular*, 30.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Secular*, 48.

⁶⁸ John S. Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), 63.

operate changes in a particular people's lives and help them rise from the conscious and unconscious death of community.

By death of community, I refer to practices done in the church and in the society that jeopardize living in community. The relationship between the diocese in Haiti and The Episcopal Church of the United States demands a reconsideration for the wellbeing of the people of Haiti. One of the significant facts is that the church has instilled in people's consciousness a dependent attitude to the "*blan*" – this is how white people are called in Haiti— mostly through the work of partnership, which is actually an assistantship and makes it difficult for Haitians to develop their own potential.

Surely the problems stem from a feeble or even a non-existent governance at the political level. This has even caused the country to let the United States destroy the Haitian rice crop. *Democracy Now* broadcasted and wrote the confession of President Bill Clinton about the disastrous decision that destroyed Haitian production of rice to the benefit of rice in Arkansas, and nothing has been done to redress the situation. The radio reports the actual words of President Clinton as follows:

It has not worked. It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake. It was a mistake that I was a party to. I am not pointing the finger at anybody. I did that. I have to live every day with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people, because of what I did. Nobody else.⁶⁹

The Haitian government could have asked for help in better agricultural tools and said "no" to the incursion of American rice but did not. Their lack of vision affected Haitian communities. We have moved from seeing our social salvation in each other, in community empowerment, to

⁶⁹ Democracy now, "Bill Clinton's Trade Policies Destroyed Haitian Rice Farming, Now Haiti Faces Post-Hurricane Famine," October 11, 2016. https://www.democracynow.org/2016/10/11/bill_clinton_s_trade_policies_destroyed Accessed November 1, 2019.

seeing it in the “*blan*.” What is the call of the church in this kind of situation? In trying to understand the “place,” the culture and the community, how can the church help redress her own misdoings and use her prophetic voice to call for better governance to strengthen the Haitian community?

Community is a word that becomes so prevalent that its use needs further specification. In the context of Haiti, community first means living together, but even more, I am because you or we are. Hence the term *lakou*, a community compound, where 10 to 15 families live within about 500 feet from each other. It used to be, not too much now, that most of these families sent a plate of food every day to some of the families in the *lakou* every day. The sharing of food means so much that it is at the heart of the Haitian community. There is this proverb that is well-known in Haiti, *manje kwit pa gen mèt*, meaning that cooked meals have no owner. Not only food, but water is very significant in the Haitian practice of hospitality, where every home has a set of glass or cup reserved only for strangers in which they are served coffee or water stressing the respect and interconnectedness of people that pass necessarily through heartfelt hospitality. This resonates with the African term *ubuntu*, elaborated in Michael Battle’s *Ubuntu, I in You and You in Me*. He states, “Ubuntu helps us see the complementarity between the individual and the community. That one is unintelligible without the other.”⁷⁰ *Ubuntu* in the African context, and *konbit* in the Haitian context, make it clear that the community is at the center of Africans and African lineage way of life.

What went wrong with the land that had the nickname of “pearl of the Antilles” before its independence that it became so desolate and impoverished at a moment where many countries who were once under poverty are now growing and striving? In *Engaging Globalization, the*

⁷⁰ Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009), 8.

poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World, Bryant L. Myers points to the development that has occurred in the world for the last twenty years. He enumerates that the world's gross domestic product has doubled, global trade has increased from \$2 trillion to over \$18 trillion, poverty has been cut in half; the death of children and women giving birth have been reduced by almost half.⁷¹ I am not challenging these statistics to examine if they are universal, but I feel there is a need to question why the situation in Haiti is getting worse and how can the church participate in redressing the situation. For sure there is something that doesn't work. For sure it has multidimensional causes: politics, education, bad governance and, of course, religion. What is the call of the church in such a situation?

Cultivating Transformational Communities: The Value of Leadership

In Chapter Two, I discussed the church's need to apply the *modus operandi* that Jesus taught his disciples in Luke 10:1-12. Jesus sent the disciple first to learn, to eat, and to bring peace just by the very fact of their presence. But that's not all. Jesus did not command his disciples to teach in the first sending in Luke 10, but in giving the Great Commission, Jesus commanded his disciples to teach. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). Then, when the time comes for the church to move beyond listening and learning, what should be done? How can the church help reinvigorate the sense of community that has lost the hope of having a better life outside of Haiti? Frantz Duval, the editor-in chief of the Haitian Newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* writes, "In 2017, only our dead do not

⁷¹ Bryant L. Myers, *Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 3.

dream of elsewhere, they are already there, in the cemetery. We have become essentially a country of potential immigrants.”⁷² What should the Church teach and do?

In Haiti, the sense of community we had and what is left of it are very much a blessing. But at the same time, there is a lack of leadership that the church can infuse through the Gospel she is proclaiming. The example of Nehemiah is one of the great examples that can infuse Haiti with functional leadership that will set the stage for transformational communities.

The story of Nehemiah offers a biblical example of community leadership to which the church in Haiti can turn. The history of Nehemiah is an instructive one whenever the church of Haiti will feel the need to do more than listening and learning. The walls of Jerusalem were devastated and vilified as it is now for the situation of Haiti. But as a leader, Nehemiah called the people together while he was still serving the powerful who devastated the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s “we” and “us” is the model of community leadership that the church is called to implement in her action. “Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace’” (Nehemiah 2:17). The essence of this calling from Nehemiah is the commitment to the common good and the astonishing fact that God is using a pagan King to give permission to Nehemiah to rebuild the city. This is leadership that transcends the boundaries of religious traditions and brings wholeness to a community in disgrace.

This passage offers hope for the current situation in Haiti, where the church is marked by a “high degree of combativeness, hostility, and discomfort between Christianity—both Protestant

⁷² Frantz Duval, Haïti : De pays essentiellement agricole à pays de potentiels immigrés, essentiellement, *Le Nouvelliste*, Publié le 2017-05-12. <https://www.lenouvelliste.com/article/171002/haiti-de-pays-essentiellement-agricole-a-pays-de-potentiels-immigres-essentiellement>

and Catholic—and Vodou.”⁷³ In his article, “Redefining Cultural, National, and Religious Identity: The Christian- Vodouist Dialogue?” Celucien L. Joseph analyzes the works of two Haitian theologians, Laënnec Hurbon, a former Catholic priest, and Jean Fils-Aimé, a Protestant pastor in Montreal. Celucien, Hurbon advocates for a “Christian-Vodouist compromissory tradition” while Fils-aimé promotes a “Protestant-Vodouist compromissory tradition.”⁷⁴ I am wondering to what extent “compromise” will heal the wounds and create paths for transformational communities with sound leadership, where Christians can learn from the “other.” As David Tracy would put it, there is a need to have a hermeneutics of suspicion before a hermeneutics of trust (or the hermeneutics of compromise). Tracy states, “If we suspect some deadly unconscious systemic ‘distortions’ are disrupting the conversation, we must stop the conversation and use some appropriate critical theory to determine whether the suspicion is justified or not.”⁷⁵ The church is called to identify what are the unconscious systemic distortions that plague our society in order to approach them critically and then move as “us” and “we.” Using Nehemiah’s leadership and a critical analysis of the country will help build transformational communities that not only bear the name community but also strive and progress. As Ken Reeves would put it, “Without leadership, people fail aimlessly and in despair.”⁷⁶ Nehemiah’s model of leadership alongside the spirituality of *konbit* suggest a path that can help the church transcend the hostility between the Gospel and the culture.

⁷³ Celucien L. Joseph, “Redefining cultural, national, and religious identity: The Christian-Vodouist dialogue?,” *Theology Today* 73, no.3, (2016): 241.

⁷⁴ Joseph, “Redefining Cultural,” 241.

⁷⁵ Catherine Cornille, and Christopher Conway, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, Interreligious Dialogue Series 2 (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 10.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Reeves, *The Whole Church: Congregational Leadership Guided by Systems Theory* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 4.

The Art of the “Agricultural Work Party”

The second constitution Haiti as a nation had from the liberator and emperor, Jean Jacques Dessalines, stipulates that agriculture is a sacred art. The constitution reads, “Agriculture, as it is the first, the most noble, and the most useful of all the arts, shall be honored and protected.”⁷⁷ Art does not follow a template, it demands creativity, imagination, and discipline that will create leadership. Trough this art bread and wine are made for the Eucharist. In “Prefiguring the Salvation of the World: The Eucharist and Agriculture,” Matthew Phillip Whelan states, “The Eucharist presupposes the planted seeds that die into the land and rise to become wheat and wine.”⁷⁸ Though this art, God’s people are fed to work for the common good.

This is how I link Nehemiah’s call to work for the common good to rebuild the city and Jeremiah’s revolutionary call to the people in exile to work where they are, plant gardens, take wives, multiply and flourish, because in their city’s welfare is their welfare as a people (Jeremiah 29). That approach is revolutionary because the Israelites might have expected the prophet to call them to seclude themselves and avoid mingling with the pagan. Instead, Jeremiah called them to thrive where they were, in the foreign land. This indeed constitutes an art.

This is the work that the church is called to engage in after taking enough time to land smoothly and artistically on the ground of a particular culture. Only then can the church move with the culture toward a meaningful dimension that will inevitably create social action where learning is possible. After defining culture, Tanner states that “this meaning dimensions of social action cannot be localized in some separate sphere specifically devoted to intellectual or spiritual

⁷⁷ *The 1805 constitution of Haiti, second constitution of Haiti, promulgated by emperor Jean Jacques Dessalines, May 20, 1805.*

⁷⁸ Matthew Phillip Whelan, “Prefiguring the Salvation of the World: The Eucharist and Agriculture,” in *Grace, and Creation: The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society*, eds. Philip J. Rossi (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 194.

concerns.”⁷⁹ Thus, both the culture and the church have the praxis dimension that cannot be ignored, a praxis dimension that forms the consciousness of people and reinvigorates social action. For example, the Haitian peasant, Christian or not, does not work on Sunday but rests. This does not remain a church practice but becomes a cultural praxis, where both Christian and non-Christian find it logical to rest on Sunday.

With this shared consciousness, is the culture becoming Christian? I would hesitate to say yes because it is not. In the article, “Some Traditional African Religions and Christianity,” R. Laroche states, “In becoming Christian, every culture undergoes a transformation, a conversion. It must accept new elements and purge itself and correct and even abandon certain traditional institutions.”⁸⁰ Unlike Laroche, I do not think a culture will become dramatically Christian, even in societies that call themselves non-secular or religious. Christianity itself has its own culture, and I do not think that she needs to seek the conversion of culture. Rather it needs to seek the transformation of people. Tanner, in analyzing the term Christian culture and posing the problem for those who think that church needs to be a separate society and those who see Christian culture in broader social terms, mentions, “Christian culture does shape the behaviors of its members, but not primarily for the purpose of guiding their interactions among themselves in the way the culture of a self-contained social network would.”⁸¹ Then, with the good news of Jesus Christ, the church is called to live in the midst of a culture, influencing behaviors, promoting the Christian culture without necessarily converting the culture. There, instead of confronting each other, the church can operate and seek people’s welfare where they are, in their place. *Konbit*, as an agricultural work party and an art, carries the sense of spirituality of agriculture that lies at the

⁷⁹ Tanner, “Cultural Theology,” 527.

⁸⁰ R. Laroche, “Some Traditional African Religions and Christianity,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, ed. C.G.Baeta (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 300.

⁸¹ Tanner, “Cultural Theology,” 535.

ground of Haitian community and also bears this cultural and spiritual praxis to help address systemic distortions that have for too long burdened and diminished the Haitian people.

Conclusion

And I can see the day arrive when both sides will come face to face:

“Well, brothers,” some will say, “are we brothers?”

‘Yes, we’re brothers,’ the others will reply.

“Without a grudge?”

“Without a grudge?”

“Really?”

“On with the coumbite?”

“On with the coumbite?”⁸²

These are Manuel’s words from Jacques Roumain's classic novel *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (Master of the Dew), that calls for the community to come together and work to bring water to the community using *konbit*. (Coumbite is the French way of writing *konbit*). In the novel, a Haitian community was desolated due to a severe drought and Manuel, through a *konbit*, Manuel has succeeded in bringing water to the community after returning from Cuba. The issues the novel describes are still present and even worse for the Haitian people. Roumain dreams of a time when there will be no grudges and we will live like brothers and sisters.

The community Roumain dreamt of and the use he made of *konbit* have not yet been realized. The country is divided on many issues: politics, class, socioeconomic situation, religion, culture, and so on. In this work, I have considered how the church can stop acting against the culture and find ways to work, really work, with the people in their context. The *konbit* Manuel initiated to find water is the *konbit* I put as a backdrop to call the church to be attentive to the context and the place she is called to share the *euangelion*, the Good News of Jesus Christ. Context is the key. It is a prerogative that the church pay attention to the context;

⁸² Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 92.

the context will give her theology meaning. In *Mission in Marginal Places*, Mike Pears and Paul J. Cloke state, “The idea of context is one in which theology can learn much from socio-scientific thoughts about places and about how they interact with the life of people that dwell in or visit them.”⁸³ From the theology of place, I suggest that the church understands the culture, learns, eats, and drinks with the people before she “opens her suitcase” to share her blessing.

That underlying principle existed in the *modus operandi* of the kingdom that Jesus set for the disciples to build upon. Jesus sent the 72 disciples to learn, eat and drink and share their peace only if the house welcomed them. It was not until the Great Commission that Jesus gave his disciples the task of teaching everything he had commanded them. Still, the need for learning and listening remains a necessary component for participating in God’s mission.

The church of Haiti, in many ways, has failed to listen. In other words, instead of listening to Haitians, she is listening to France and trying to convert not only to the gospel, but also to a westernized culture. This has led the church to be a weapon for colonization then and now. Ela notes, “Christianity was utilized as an effective weapon for the ‘good’ of colonized peoples, that is as a means of bringing them ‘civilization’ and struggling with their traditional religious and social practices.”⁸⁴ Colonialization is not simply something from the past, but it is still happening right now in our world, in Haiti, and the church is complicit in many ways. Being complicit does not mean that the church cannot participate in the liberation of the nation. It needs first to acknowledge her complicity, lament and repent and then proceed to act for renewal in the translatability that the context imposes upon her.

Thus, I used the Haitian *konbit*, as this event has powerful and too-often-overlooked outcomes that can help the church participate in the transformation of Haitian society. But how

⁸³ Mike, Pears, and Paul J Cloke, eds. *Mission in Marginal Places* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016), 6

⁸⁴ Jean Marc Elan, *African Cry*, 43

can a society be transformed and liberated if its essence and culture are denied? There is a need to reconsider how the church relates to the culture. One of the aspects I considered is agriculture that our emperor calls an art, a sacred art that calls for creativity, imagination, and leadership that should infuse the actions of the church. This art of agricultural work is the source of the bread and wine we put on the true table that unites Christians. It is through this agricultural work party that Haitians can see anew their relationship with the earth and each other and that the church can reform her relationship with the culture.

The way Haitians see the earth and nature is connected to the Eucharistic blessing and cannot be ignored by the church in the *konbit* that will open up ways forward for a better future. This is the theology I argued for that can have a profound and holistic effect on people that transcends the barriers of class, religion, and socioeconomic situation. Rah states, “We need a theology that is holistic and understands that the transforming power of the gospel can have a profound effect on race and ethnicity issues in a culture.”⁸⁵

In *konbit*, the agricultural work party that provides bread and wine for the Eucharist, there is the basis for the holistic theology to transform and translate. Because in the praxis of coming together, living together as brother and sisters, lies the welfare of the church and the people she seeks to serve.

⁸⁵ Rah, *Many Colors*, 162

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