

DOC.ID:	PRA_02
Language:	English
Original:	French
Provisional translation	



Testimony

Victoria Kamondji

Vice-President Protestant Federation of France

Living in Europe as a Christian placing my hope in Jesus Christ can be summed up for me in one word: BELONGING.

As a committed Christian, born and baptised in the Anglican Church, I was confirmed in the Methodist Church when eighteen years old. I spent my teenage years in a Roman Catholic boarding school run by the Irish sisters of the Order of St Joseph of Cluny. I arrived in France more than twenty years ago, towards the end of the twentieth century, and I was made welcome by the Reformed Church of France.

I am originally from Sierra Leone, and so English-speaking, and my presence in Europe is due to my doctoral studies and their completion, at the University of Charles de Gaulle, Lille 3, in the north of France. There is one constant factor in my life in Europe, which seemed to me some twenty years ago so remote, so different, and sometimes so indifferent, and that is my faith and my hope in Jesus Christ. The welcome that I received in the Reformed Church of France gave me, for the first time in my life, a sense of belonging, belonging to a family, the family of God, sharing the same faith, the same hope. As a foreigner I discovered another facet of the church, a facet which had gone unnoticed as long as I was in my country of origin.

I found the church to be a place of welcome, safety, good relationships and inclusiveness – at the speed I wanted to go. I could be certain that I would be listened to, understood, appreciated and accepted just as I was. Sharing in the life of the church meant that I could make a useful contribution, useful to myself and to others. I discovered the joy of giving, of giving myself, and receiving in return. The sense of belonging gave me confidence, certainly, but also a sense of responsibility, for myself and for others. The feeling of being understood, of being supported by the confidence shown in me by certain church members, also gave me a sense of dignity. Although a foreigner in Europe, I was not alone, I belonged somewhere, to someone, to Jesus Christ. And that belonging took its most concrete form in the church, and was shown in a love that transcended social, cultural, racial and language differences. I belonged to a family, where I had brothers and sisters, a family where we were all united in our hope in the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ.



When, some ten years later, I found myself in a Protestant migrants' church, that hope was shown primarily at national level by the acceptance of the Community of African and Caribbean Churches in France into membership of the Protestant Federation of France. That showed a degree of openness that would have been inconceivable some ten years previously when I joined the Reformed Church. And that not to mention the efforts made by the Federation to establish contact and dialogue, not only between those with Protestant roots, but also with those from other church traditions and religious sympathies.

I am witnessing a church that is evolving, a church that is always on the move, not only at national level but also at European level. There are increasing contacts, on the one hand, between the traditional churches, and, on the other hand, in a meaningful way, between the traditional churches and the migrants' churches. While the boundaries separating those churches are becoming increasingly 'porous', we are also seeing a multiplicity of efforts, on all sides, aimed at growing together and unity, while respecting diversity, differences and distinctiveness. In view of my ecumenical past, I cannot but rejoice at these developments. And it is a growing trend.

In November 2008, at Palermo in Sicily, the first Africa-Europe Consultation on migration and the changing ecclesiastical landscape was held. The consultation was organised jointly by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). We discussed unity and the desire and the necessity for us to be "church together".

Even more significant is the MIRACLE (Models of Integration through Religion, Activation, Cultural Learning and Exchange) project, organised by CCME, already under way and which will investigate the active participation of immigrant Christians in the historic European churches. The intention of the project is to emphasise the role that the historic churches can play in the integration of migrant Christians.

In the light of all these developments, and of others that I may not know of, it is clear that the churches of Europe, whatever their traditions or sympathies, can no longer ignore one another, or be exclusive in their attitude to one another. The words "unity" and "integration" are no longer taboo, because there is, it seems to me, a recognition that we belong to a common origin, in our hope in Jesus Christ. This belonging to the body of Christ transcends membership of a particular church or a given socio-political institution. "Being church together", belonging to one another on the horizontal plane, finds its complete fulfilment in all of us together having our one hope in Jesus Christ. Despite the difficulties we may meet, Jesus Christ remains the unifying factor in whom we can place our faith and our hope.

As Konrad Raiser, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, 1992-2004, said, "there is no going back on our journey towards unity". What I am seeing and experiencing these days is this desire to get to know one another and to undertake (to quote Konrad



Raiser again) “the task of mutual understanding, facilitated by our awareness of the importance of the contribution that each one makes.”

Finally, I would like to add that it is very significant, and highly symbolic, that Lyon has been chosen for this 13th Assembly of the Conference of European Churches. If I remember aright, it is from this city that, in the 19th century, missionaries of the Society for African Missions (Société des Missions Africaines, or SMA) went out to evangelise and Christianise Africa. Today this short testimony is given to you by a Christian originating from Africa.

Thank you.