

# Rev. Professor Kwame Bediako in memoriam

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It is with deep regret and sorrow we received the message that the Ghanaian theologian and missiologist, Rev. Professor Kwame Bediako, died on June 10, 2008. Prof. Bediako was born in 1945 as the second of ten children in Agona Nsaba in the Central Region of Ghana. After finishing elementary and middle school Bediako gained entrance to the elite Mfantsipim School, Cape Coast, where his unusual intellectual and leadership gifts soon were acknowledged. He then studied French at the University of Ghana, and won a scholarship to pursue Masters and Doctoral degrees in French and African literature in French at the University of Bordeaux, France, in the late 1960s. Having been influenced by French existentialism, Bediako was an atheist when arriving in France, but here, in August 1970, he experienced a radical conversion to Christ, a “Damascus experience”, that changed his life. He became a fervent Christian equally occupied with intellectual reflection and practical evangelism and mission. He met his wife to be, Gillian Mary, in Bordeaux, and their wedding took place in 1973. Together they have two sons. They have had a unique and close working relationship until Bediako’s death, “a life-long partnership in Christian service” as it is expressed in the “Biography of Bediako” that was published prior to the funeral in a booklet with several tributes (*Call to Glory*. Rev. Professor Kwame Bediako, FGA, 1945-2008).

When he became a Christian Bediako felt a call from God to

fulltime Christian ministry and studied at London Bible College 1973-1976. He was ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in 1978, and was almost immediately sent to pursue doctoral studies in Aberdeen, Scotland, under Prof. Andrew Walls who became his mentor and lifelong friend. He graduated in 1983, and returned to Ghana to serve as a pastor in Accra Ridge Church in Accra.

Prof. Bediako attended the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, and had ever since been occupied with the idea of a research and training centre devoted to enhancing Christian ministry in the African context. After his return to Ghana he took the initiative to and built up what is now the internationally recognised Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture in Akropong-Akuapem. Bediako was the director of the Institute until his death. In spite of many offers to move to other parts of the world to teach at prestigious universities, he decided to stay in his home country and serve the church in Africa.

Prof. Bediako received a number of awards and served on several international networks and institutions. For many years he was the Chairman of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT), and its daughter institution, the Oxford Centre of Mission Studies. He was also the chairman and director of the African Theological Initiative, a project designed to strengthen theological education across the African continent.

In his tribute to Prof. Bediako, Prof. Andrew Walls mentions five great motive forces that are manifest in all of Bediako's work and that shaped his thinking. The first was Christian discipleship, seeking a full conversion, being completely turned to Christ. The second was his love and understanding of the Scriptures, the third his love for and loyalty to Africa and its people and his conviction that God was at work in Africa calling Africans to discipleship within African culture. The fourth motive force called him to the highest ideals of scholarship, and the fifth was his catholic spirit, being open to all who loved Christ. He affirmed the work of Western missionaries and he was also concerned with Latin American and Western Christianity, as well as African. "No one could be more ecumenical in the fullest sense; here, truly was a world Christian" (Walls, in *Call to Glory*, p. 25).

Prof. Bediako visited Norway several times and developed a

special relationship to Norwegian missiologists as well as the theological institutions that he visited. In appreciation of his outstanding contribution to African theological scholarship and his close relation to MF Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo, Norway, he was this year awarded an honorary doctorate on the occasion of the school's centenary celebration on September 3, 2008, an award and an invitation that he graciously accepted. His wife Prof. Gillian Bediako agreed to attend the centenary celebration and posthumously receive the doctorate on Prof. Bediako's behalf.

The special relationship between Prof. Bediako and the school can also be seen in the fact that Prof. Bediako was invited to hold the first Prof. O. G. Myklebust Memorial Lecture in 2005 on the centenary of the birth of the founder of missiology as a theological discipline in Norway and author of the magisterial work on mission in theological education. Prof. Bediako's own magnum opus *Theology and Identity* (1992, 500p) is used as a required textbook in a Master's program, and his article on contextual *African Christology* is part of the curriculum of the pastoral educational program. His name and work are well known among Norwegian pastors and students.

The Methodist missiologist, Associate Professor Dr. Roar G. Fotland at MF Norwegian School of Theology, defended in 2005 his doctoral thesis "Ancestor Christology in Context. Theological Perspectives of Kwame Bediako" at Bergen University where Prof. Andrew Walls and myself served as readers and opponents. This dissertation represents a penetrating and appreciative study of Prof. Bediako's theological thought.

It was also a great experience for me personally to be invited by Prof. Bediako to join the Council of African Theological Initiative and be able to meet twice in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Especially moving was the prayer meeting in commemoration of the death of Prof. Bediako's father held during one of these meetings. There I got a profoundly personal encounter with Bediako's own deep Christian spirituality as well as that of other African leaders and scholars.

It was a privilege to be asked to represent MF at the funeral of Bediako July 5- 6 in Ghana. What was called "Preburial and Burial Services" took place in the large Presbyterian church in Accra

where Bediako had served as a pastor, Accra Ridge Church. More than 1000 mourners were present during the 5 hours long services, with singing, preaching and tributes. Especially moving were the tributes of Mrs. Gillian Bediako and one of her sons. After the services the casket was taken to Akropong where Prof. Bediako was buried in the old Basel Mission Cemetery established during the early part of the Basel Mission's work in Ghana in the 19th century. On Sunday a Thanksgiving Service was celebrated in the "mother church" of the Presbyterian Church in Ghana, the Christ Presbyterian Church in Akropong, situated adjacent to the Akrofi-Christaller Institute, followed by a reception at the Institute with more singing and dancing. Large numbers of Ghanaians as well as several international guests from Africa, Europe and America attended the funeral services.

We would like to honour Prof. Kwame Bediako as one of, if not the, outstanding African theologian of our time. His kind and caring personality, brilliant and inquisitive mind, mastery of theological formulation, and deep commitment both to Biblical Christianity and the African context will be a lasting legacy for generations to come. He was deeply concerned with the contextualization of the gospel in relation to pre-Christian religion and culture, a concern that led him to challenge us in Norway to look once again at our pre-Christian past during the Viking age almost 1000 years ago! We look upon Prof. Bediako as one of our ancestors, as one of the "great cloud of witnesses" that encourages us to "throw everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebr. 12:1). Kwame Bediako has completed his race and we are deeply grateful to God for what he has meant and still means to us.