Dictionary of African Christian Biography 2.0

In September 2017, after over 20 years as a venerable HTML-based website, the DACB underwent a complete redesign. Consultants at the Software and Application Innovation Lab (SAIL) at Boston University’s Hariri Institute were incredulous that a website as large as the DACB, with over 4,700 files, had survived so long on an HTML platform. In hushed tones, they said it belonged in a museum.

The chain of events that led to the DACB website redesign
began earlier that year. In March 2017, CGCM Associate Director Daryl Ireland and DACB Project Manager Michèle Sigg attended a conference on digital humanities projects on the recommendation of Dr. Vika Zafrin, BU Digital Scholarship Librarian. At the conference, they learned about the principles of minimal computing from Alex Gil, Digital Scholarship Coordinator for Humanities and History at Columbia University.

Minimal computing simplifies the design and function of a website in order to focus primarily on its content rather than offering complex features that rely on external databases, technologies, and software to make it run. Minimal design reduces the need for updating and maintenance and keeps data consumption low. The result is a standalone, fast-loading website that users can easily access, on multiple devices, even in areas where Internet is slow. It is even possible to design the site so that it can be distributed on flash drives in areas where there is no Internet access.

It turned out that the DACB project had already integrated the principles of minimal computing in its overall ethos. In order for the DACB to “make freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories” (DACB mission statement) to individuals and institutions in Africa, the website design had always included a lightweight, easy-loading interface that was also portable for use in areas without Internet access. The need to make DACB content accessible to a specific audience had always driven the site’s structure.

However, as the site had grown to include over 2,500 biographies in multiple sub sites, the Html interface made maintenance and updating very time-consuming. The DACB needed a new interface. Through contact with Gil, Sigg learned about Jekyll, an open-source software for website design created by GitHub, a platform that was launched in April 2008.

In May, the redesign project came together with the hiring of Alex Mayfield, 2nd year Ph.D student at the CGCM, as web developer. Because of the size of the site, the DACB subcontracted with SAIL to write a script that would transfer the bulk of the site files from the old interface to the new one.

After four months of intensive coding, Mayfield had created a new fast-loading site, with adaptive design for multiple size screens, and a standalone search engine that worked even without an Internet connection, making the site fully portable. In addition, he and Sigg redesigned the indexes and added new ones to enhance research opportunities on the site.

Visit the new site and try it out (dacb.org). If you have any questions or feedback, email Michèle Sigg at dacb@bu.edu.
China’s Urban Presbyterians

The True Heirs of the Reformation?

Chinese Christianity is undergoing a significant shift. For years, unregistered churches have flourished under charismatic leaders and been sustained by informal networks. A recent development is challenging that system. A high profile and media-savvy group of urban Christians in the western city of Chengdu is pushing churches to develop standards and structures for congregational life. Refusing to conform to strongman leadership and the lack of rule of law in Chinese society, they pursue the republican ideal epitomized in Presbyterianism. They also follow an entrepreneurial logic in building their churches and social momentum, contending with the government for moral authority. In 2013, three churches in Chengdu took the lead in forming the Western China Presbytery. Despite the name, they do not intend to ape western denominations. “Instead of making [this] city another Geneva, Geneva is made into [this] city,” one informant told CGCM researcher Yongguang [Max] Xue.

The churches have gone about their project of transforming their city by establishing Christian schools for children, opening a liberal arts college, operating a seminary, and challenging the government in a variety of ways.

Despite being unregistered churches, these congregations intentionally refuse to operate underground. They meet with government officials, hold services in public spaces, are visibly engaged in various ministries throughout the city, and even mobilize to protest such things as abortion.

Chinese Presbyterians, Xue discovered, believe the Reformed tradition can help them accomplish their three-fold mission: “the

“Instead of making [this] city another Geneva, Geneva is made into [this] city.”

NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR (continued from page 1)

of student assistants Yongguang [Max] Xue, Kexin [Maria] Ren, Alex Mayfield, and Visiting Researcher Man Hei Yip we are digitizing and captioning colorful Christian propaganda posters, housed in thirteen institutions on three continents. After scanning them, an online website will make them available for the public to study, appreciate, and enjoy.

Thank you to all the supporters and friends of the Center, who together continue to make our work possible. During 2017 I was on sabbatical as a Henry Luce III Fellow in Theology, researching cross-cultural friendship in the 20th century. Despite war, colonialism, racism, and other social evils, Christians of different cultures and nationalities have cherished relationships with those unlike themselves. Friendships across boundaries of difference witness to worldwide community. May we continue to pursue the vision of the CGCM, to be “a community of learners, researchers and doers who live out their missional callings through critical reflection, faithful witness, and thoughtful engagement with multiple cultures around the world.” Best wishes for 2018!

Dana L. Robert
European powers expanding into southwest Africa in the 17th century confronted a cunning and capable leader in Queen Njinga. Linda Heywood has been tracking and uncovering the story of this complex figure for years, teasing out how she ruled and what role her faith played in her kingdom. Earlier this year, Professor Heywood published *Njinga, History, Memory, and Politics and Culture: Angola and the African Diaspora* with Harvard University Press. The book has received outstanding reviews, and Dr. Heywood had a chance to speak about her project at the Library of Congress on November 9, 2017.

Pastor Wang Yi Leads Morning Prayer

This article is based on the CGCM-sponsored research of Yongguang [Max] Xue in the fall of 2017.