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Boston University School of Theology

2020

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A GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION



Casely B. Essamuah ('03)

AT THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM, CASELY B. ESSAMUAH HELPS BRING DENOMINATIONS TOGETHER

BY ANDREW THURSTON

Christians in Pakistan face some of the highest levels of persecution in the world: a religious minority, they often fall afoul of strict blasphemy laws or are targeted by terrorist organizations like the Islamic State. Militants have struck Methodist and Catholic churches—even a park packed with families celebrating Easter.

At the third Global Christian Forum international gathering in Bogotá, Colombia, in spring 2018, church leaders from around the world discussed discrimination against people of faith, including those in Pakistan. It's an issue, the leaders were reminded, individual churches can't face alone.

"Persecution doesn't differentiate between Lutheran or Baptist or Orthodox—everyone is treated the same at the point of death," says Casely B. Essamuah, secretary of the Global Christian Forum. "He who unites us is more significant than that which divides us."

As secretary, Essamuah ('03) helps Christians celebrate what connects them and confront common challenges, from changing demographics to violence against places of worship. The forum hosts global and regional gatherings where representatives of the World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, Pentecostal World Fellowship, Roman Catholic Church, and a myriad of smaller denominations

"come together and encounter each other," says Essamuah. They pray, listen to talks on trends in Christianity, and share faith stories, whether about an important moment in one life or in the growth of a movement.

"We've realized that those stories are very significant in breaking down barriers," says Essamuah. "More often than not, people soon realize they have very similar storylines: there might have been a crisis in their life, then someone reached out to them, gave them a sense of hope. Along with the doctrinal beliefs we have, the stories are what bind us together."

He calls the forum a safe space.

"We're bringing members of diverse Christian denominations to a table to see what is it that we have in common and whether that's enough of a foundation for us to do something together," says Essamuah, who's keen to note that the forum doesn't think of itself as an organization or institution, but as a networking platform. The goal, he says, is to encourage denominations to look beyond "the differences between us in terms of how we baptize or who we baptize, how we do missions or if we do missions, how we serve communion, who can be ordained—the issues that divide us—to get people to a practical stage of a common mission and ministry." Two churches from different denominations coming together, for instance, to serve people in need of



Essamuah (left) was inaugurated as secretary of the Global Christian Forum at its 2018 gathering in Bogotá, Colombia.

food or working together to offer community services.

"When you get to know someone, when you pray with and for someone while looking into their eyes, it's very difficult to fight that person," Essamuah says.

Prayer has always been part of Essamuah's life. As a child, he lived in a mission house—a parsonage—in Ghana. His father was a minister and, in later life, presiding bishop of the Methodist Church Ghana. There was Bible study every day and Essamuah often joined his

father as he traveled the country as an itinerant minister.

By 24, Essamuah was ordained in the Methodist Church Ghana too. At 28, he won a scholarship to study theology in the United States, at Harvard. He expected it would be a short-term assignment.

"I was thinking the best thing I could do was to get the best education that the United States had to offer and go back and train other ministers. God had a different plan altogether."

Once he arrived, he found the

classes dulled by talk of politics and church life dour compared to the vibrant charismatic worship he'd grown up with. "I was ready to bail out," he says. Then he visited the historic Park Street Church, on the edge of Boston Common. There, Essamuah discovered a home. The benches were full of other migrants and the church shared his commitments to local and global mission and to reaching out to other denominations.

At Park Street, Essamuah met his future wife—they later baptized

Photos courtesy of the Global Christian Forum



Essamuah's role brings him in contact with religious leaders from around the world, including the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (left) and Justin Welby (opposite page), the Archbishop of Canterbury.

“Persecution doesn’t differentiate between Lutheran or Baptist or Orthodox—everyone is treated the same at the point of death.”

—Casely B. Essamuah

their children there—and served for nearly eight years as the church’s first minister of missions. He also recommitted himself to graduate education, earning a doctorate at BU. “The main attraction for me of BU was Dana Robert,” says Essamuah of STH’s Truman Collins Professor of World Christianity and History of Mission. “It was not only her teaching style and the content she taught, but the people she brought together—she and they were more in tune with what was happening around the world.”

Given his background, Essamuah had a particular interest in Christianity’s tilt away from the Western world. By 2060, six of the countries with the largest Christian populations will be in Africa, according to the Pew Research Center. As well as influencing his choice of classes at STH, the geographic shifting of Christianity has increasingly shaped Essamuah’s professional life, first at Park Street, then as global missions pastor at Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, Md.

“When you get to know someone, when you pray with and for someone while looking into their eyes, it’s very difficult to fight that person.”
—Casely B. Essamuah

“I was working with local ministry leaders to spread the love of Jesus Christ to families living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in Uganda, with young pastors in India planting new churches across the countryside, with a youth center in El Salvador inculcating the values of Jesus Christ to these young minds,” he says. “There’s a world out there that is desperately looking for models of faith, love, and grace in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We need to be seen sharing that with others who might look different from us, pray differently from us, or belong to a different denomination.”

When he first heard about the Global Christian Forum position, Essamuah wasn’t interested. But a call to Robert, who’d spoken at one of its gatherings, helped convince him to apply. “It’s not a job,” she told him, “it’s a calling.”

Essamuah was formally inaugurated as secretary of the Global Christian Forum at its gathering in Bogotá in 2018. He’s the only full-time employee—the organization

Photos courtesy of the Global Christian Forum



has a part-time event coordinator, finance officer, and communications officer, but any other organizational support comes from volunteers. Next on his agenda is preparing regional forums in South America and Africa—and rearranging meetings that were postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. “We are always asking ourselves, ‘Who else is not at the table?’” he says.

Essamuah has met with church leaders across the world, from the Pope to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he says even those

leading small congregations can play a role in uniting the Christian family. He recognizes that for some, joining with old foes isn’t always easy. Throughout history, denominations have argued, fought, even killed over their doctrinal differences. “But that shouldn’t stop us from moving ahead and encountering each other and seeing what we can do together, on this side of eternity, to make our world livable and full of faith, love, and grace.

“The Gospel is forgiveness; the Gospel is reconciliation.” □