

Background

In the gospel according to John Chapter 9, we read of an event that took place during the work and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As they went along, he saw a man born blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind”? “Neither this man nor his parents sinned”, said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of the one who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world”.

Having said this, he spat on the ground, made some mud, with saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go, he told him, wash in the pool of Siloam”. So the man went and washed and came back home seeing. John 9:1-7.

In the story, Jesus sees a suffering man and responds to his suffering. In this incident, Jesus refuses to waste time discussing the questions of his disciples who were more interested in the question of “who sinned?” Instead Jesus sets his mind in helping the man who is suffering so that he could be able to see. He declared, “As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world. We must do the work of the one who sent me while it is still day, night is coming when no one can work anymore. He therefore acted with speed providing sight for the blind man and ensured that no time was wasted before this is done. It is the only miracle in which Jesus performs “work” in order to heal. A reminder that healing the world will involve hard work and must be done with speed and love for those who are suffering.

The story has informed most of my spiritual approach to the issues that face the church in our time. Our African context has suffered greatly and continues to do so even now. Most of the people say that they do not see the end to suffering coming soon. Some are asking questions similar to those of the disciples “who sinned that Africans are suffering this way? who sinned? The people living there now or their fore fathers and mothers in the past? While it is understandable that questions like these are raised, there are a number of ways in which to respond in the story, the disciples choose one way and Jesus on the other hand chooses the other. In my opinion Jesus choose the most helpful way for the suffering man. He wanted to help him. He saw the need and it is on that basis that he helped the blind man. He gave him sight and was able to see. Meaning that his suffering must have been reduced. Spirituality is about following the footsteps of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is about serving others. Using this approach, this paper will reflect African Spirituality as we experience it in relation to the Kairos Seminar below.

Spiritual Disciplines and Pastoral Leadership:

Following my participation on the above Kairos Seminar April 22-26, 2002, and through this reflective paper, I would like to examine the two methodological approaches to those who suffer:

1. The Political response, which is similar to that of the disciples who asked the questions of “who sinned”, but were not very keen to help. And

2. What is considered in my view to be the Spiritual response similar to that of Jesus who saw the need and helped the suffering Man right away.
3. A reflection as to which of the two approaches is useful for the churches and helps to foster a deeper spirituality for the people who suffer in Africa today.

We begin by examining:

The Context:

1. The Southern African. Malawian Context.

A). The Country Profile.

Geography and Location

Malawi is a small country located in the Southern Eastern part of Africa. It is landlocked with varying terrain across it. Sharing borders with it is Zambia to the West, Tanzania to the North and Mozambique to the East and South. Malawi covers an area of 118,480 sq. km. It's capital is Lilongwe. Malawi's major geographic features are the mountains, rivers, and Lake Malawi, which covers over 1/4 of the country.

People and the Economy

Malawi has a population of 10 million with ethnic groupings and languages. More than 80% of the people are Christians comprising of 60% Protestants and 20% Catholics. The remaining 20% compromise 15-18% Muslims and 2-5% belong to traditional indigenous beliefs and other religions.

As a land-locked country, Malawi's economy is predominantly based on agriculture, which accounts for 45% of gross National Product and more than 90% of the country's export earnings. 80% of the agricultural produce comes from smallholder farmers on customary land. The main crops grown are maize, tobacco, tea, sugarcane, groundnuts, cotton, wheat, coffee, rice, and soybeans. It is important here to note that Malawi is mainly an exporter of primary produce (raw materials) and a net importer of industrial goods (finished products). Malawi therefore is one of the world's poorest countries. The UNDP 1999 Human Development reports per capita income at approximately \$169.00US with more than 60% of the population living below the poverty datum line of about \$40.00 per capital income. Life expectancy is estimated at 45 years and falling. The illiteracy rate is estimated at 56%. Infant mortality is alarmingly high. Malaria kills most children below the age of 5 years while HIV/AIDS has taken its toll on the productive middle ages.

B). A Look at the:

Profile of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi (ELCM).

Historical Background- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi was founded November 21, 1982 by lay people who had become Lutherans while working in the neighboring countries of Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Finding little comfort in the existing Lutheran Church

of Central Africa (Zambia and Malawi), the mission field of the conservative Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), they longed for the Lutheranism they were used to in those countries. The group led by Mr. Gilbert Msuku who has been in Tanzania for over twenty years, founded the ELCM. The church, which began without any pastors or missionaries, grew so rapidly that it had to request pastoral leadership from those churches in the neighboring countries of Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. These arrangements continued until 1987 when the ELCM ordained its first three pastors. Currently the church has approximately 30,000 members in more than 160 congregations with nearly thirty pastors serving 26 parishes scattered throughout the country. ELCM elected its first Bishop in 1995 and is governed by the church-wide assembly, which elects church officers and a church council empowered to set policy and make decisions between the assembly meetings. The church's officers are in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. Evangelism and lay leadership training are top priority for the ELCM.

Backbone to these activities is its string of women's group and youth's groups as pioneers of the outreach program based on Bible studies and songs (music). Each congregation has its own outreach program. Women groups lead the church effort in alms giving and caring for the sick and the needy. The youth on the other hand are responsible for work among Sunday school children. Because of its background as indicated above, ELCM's self-understanding as dominantly a lay people's church is clearly manifested in all its undertakings. The most of its congregations is lead by lay leadership. The clergy are secondary visiting congregations may once in six weeks for sacraments. Lay people both make female, young and old involve themselves in every aspect of church leadership. They are very independent and also willing to learn more skills about what the church is all about.

Right from its inception, ELCM took social improvement, as its prime concern. Parallel with preaching and teaching the gospel, ELCM has been deeply involved in the social well being of its members and the citizens of Malawi. A small rapidly growing church, the ELCM is an active member of various ecumenical organizations both locally and internationally to the point that its impact has been felt as a partner in the gospel and a counterpart on the effort to bring about peace with justice in the suffering world today. The creation of the Office of the Bishop in 1995 has strengthened the unity of the ELCM and its growth throughout Malawi. The Bishop's major responsibilities in the church are those of visiting parishes to offer support and encouragement the parish pastors and their parishioners. This is necessary in order to provide hope for those who suffer. Like in Christ's time, we see needs and try to respond to them in the manner that is possible for the church today.

Understanding the Context

The context as described above provides the opportunity for the ELCM's ministry to be holistic in nature. Most of its members live in rural areas and are generally poor. The situation has been worsened by the presence of the killer diseases such as HI V/AIDS which is killing mostly productive middle aged people, and Malaria which kills mostly children under the age of 5 years. In addition to the primary responsibility of preaching the word of God, the ELCM can also be described as the voice of the voiceless and an advocate of change for the betterment of those marginalized in society- the poor (usually orphans). In this regard, and for the sake of these young children, the church feels compelled to operate **hope projects** such as: feeding centers for

Aids orphans and small scale income generating projects for widows. Most of these efforts are like a drop in the ocean even though they are still appreciated by the people we serve.

Such other projects include:

- Adult education for women and men who cannot read and write
- Provision for clean water wells in villages
- HIV/AIDS care and prevention messages for all ages especially the youth (both girls and boys)
- Skill training for women and young people
- Feeding centers for under-nourished children (orphans) and the needy children in general
- Primary schools and the Girls Secondary school in Bwengu
- Home economics for women and primary health care in general
- Family health care and education on family planning
- Care practices and many others such life improving projects. The mobile clinics will strengthen these services in all of the three regions of Malawi. It will be like a clinic on wheels going to offer medical help to those who need it is and around the villages.

Facing the Challenge

The ELCM position is that as long as Africa and its countries remain economically poor, the challenges will remain and will grow. Churches and governments must continue their efforts to make life bearable for the poor, but the answer is a collective one. The whole international community needs to join hands in the battle to fight poverty and systems of economic injustice that continue to make poor countries poorer and rich countries richer, and thereby also widening the growing gap between the rich and the poor. We need to work for justice dealings in international trade and fight corruption that robs people of their justly deserved resources at all levels. The role of the church in it's prophetic ministry needs to be revived and even emphasized, naming sin by its name, and pointing to the will of God for all his people in all countries of the world. The ELCM like other African churches will need to provide leadership in this effort as they themselves carry most of the burden and have to live with these burdens in their daily ministry. The word of God and his promises remain the source of hope for those who live in poverty and injustice. The church must remain strong in its ministry based on the knowledge that God has promised to be always present with it up to the end. We should not allow sin and persistent sufferings of human life to become the stumbling block to the gospel message of our Lord Jesus.

The Political Response and the Role of the Church.

The Church as a Partner with Government

Have the opportunity to join hands and give hope to the world.

As you will have noted from above, the African continent is a suffering continent. It is there that the Lutheran Church in Malawi is witnessing and growing. As already pointed out, the context has a lot to do with how the church perceives itself and its mission. Here unlike elsewhere the

church is preoccupied with giving hope to the hopeless and giving life to the dying. Spiritually the people are very much alive, but physically they are dying and don't understand the reasons behind continued suffering. The pastors, of which the bishop is one among others, are constantly engaged in theological reflection and lead the people on a theological journey to find meaning to life in the midst of suffering, to find life in the midst of death, to find light in the midst of darkness. This is done together in small group Bible studies. People are taken seriously and so are their contributions to the life and ministry of ELCM. These groups are crucial to the spiritual survival of Christian's especially young people who question why God allow so much suffering in the world especially in Africa. Most of these young people are orphans who lost their parents to AIDS and are sometimes themselves HIV positive and often sick. In Africa nothing is more painful than to lose parents when you are young. Life becomes almost impossible. It is these activities of bible prayer groups in the church that gives reason for many to live their lives. Such living is more than life, it is spiritual living. Day By Day By Grace (Dr. Martin Luther).

Pastoral Visits

Bishops are regularly required to visit pastors in order to provide encouragement. Most of the pastors find themselves serving in very difficult situations, far from everybody else. Here the bishop will visit and offer encouragement. This is important for the pastor who must in turn offer encouragement to his parishioners. The bishop's visitation program is a time of revival and renewal. It is also a time of witnessing to a wider community through evangelism. During these visits hope is offered through life giving sermons that the bishop must deliver to his flock. The sermons are expected to be spiritually powerful and life giving for those who suffer.

For example it is common knowledge that when I am visiting the parishes during the bishop's yearly visit, the services will be long, normally between three to four hours long. This is not so because people have nothing to do, or have time to waste, but rather because these visits are spiritually necessary and offers hope for living.

They tell us that:

- a). It is good to be in the house of God and they are pleased when someone tells them "Let's go to the house of the Lord". They wait for these days to come. They want to hear what God wants to say through his messenger. "It is good for us to be here", Is a commonly shared experience during these visits.
- b). Their presence at the church with the bishop unites them with many other fellow members of the church. It is time for Bible studies and Theological reflection on what is happening in general. Using bible passages, we reflect on our spirituality sharing about our experiences together and sharing the little we have, and counting and trusting God for tomorrow.
- c). The Gospel is regularly shared and has been shared with others like them in the church elsewhere. Through it they find hope and a purpose for living. Here serious challenges such as HIV/AIDS are openly discussed helping with advice for a changed lifestyle. This is done with a seriousness to demonstrate how bad the situation is.

d). In addition to celebrating sacraments, they may witness dedication of their new church or ordination of their new pastor; and many more. Above all, it is time for groups e.g. youth and women to meet the Bishop and discuss matters that affect them in the church. Together we discuss outreach programs and one to one Christian witnesses.

You can therefore see that the visits are part of the church's journey and celebrated with a lot of anticipation. They form one of the church's major activities, the Bishops visits bring them the wider fellowship of the church. Even Christians of other denominations join in with them during such visits. Our work in ecumenism is strengthened by witnessing together as Christians. We speak more of what unites us than what separates us. Our congregations learn to work and cooperate with other denominations because the people we serve come from the same families. Pastors will usually cover a number of Congregations that are lead by our lay leaders. These lay leaders who are both male and female expects regular pastoral visits from their pastor. Pastoral visits are a must for our Pastors. They are required to visit congregations regularly. This is so because Pastors like Bishops are understood to be spiritual leaders.

Pastoral visits aims at reviving spirituality and giving hope. This is one of the fundamental roles of the church in society. We see this throughout history and it ought to be so even today as we face our contemporary challenges. There are so many difficulties that we easily become overwhelmed and heartbroken. Our nations are very unstable. We fear our people are easily intimidated. So just like the rats we ask each other "who will hang the bell on the neck of the cat". No one is courageous enough to carry out such risky task of going to hang the bell in the neck of the cat for fearing that they may not come back alive. This is so because it is common sense that our Politicians have been known for their readiness to kill those who may oppose them. Speaking of HIV/AIDS, we don't know what to say or what to do. The pandemic is like nothing we have ever seen before. It is a real killer. It kills mostly our adults, while Malaria continues to kill children especially those children less than five years of age. These challenges reminds us to implement all our work as holistically as possible thereby prepares us to confront the challenges we face on a daily basis. As you will agree, this can only be possible with the help of God. We therefore have no choice but to be spiritual and seek God's guidance in all that we do.

Another difficulty was that, in an attempt to liberate the African countries from political dictators, the western European Countries froze economic Development aid to those African countries.

It worked, but the process created more poverty to the point that the dictators gave up power and yielded to Democracy, "a western way of Democracy" and aid was resumed only that this time it was much less than the level at which was frozen. In most cases, it was less than a quarter of the original aid package. Until today many people still live on less than one dollar a day. One wonders if the Political questions will bring us the answers, let alone the solutions to the sufferings we witness in the world today. There is more poverty now than at any time in the history of our country. Poverty has created a bleeding ground for diseases including HIV/AIDS.

As could be seen, these stages were not systematic, but can demonstrate to a reasonable degree how poverty found its roots on the African continent including my own country of Malawi. The current economic aid to poor countries has a tie or string attached to it, and that is human rights and good Governance. This in most cases is understood to mean that in whatever way the aid is used, its focus must be centered on strengthening good Governance. However in African countries, Good governance is currently pre dominantly understood to mean having an election every five years. This is so because that's what is done in the Western European countries or the USA. They do have elections every five years. In Africa however, it shouldn't matter even if the same leaders are elected again and again. Elections seem to use up all the available financial resources so that there is very little left for Education and medical care both of which are key to economic development. For the ordinary citizens this development pauses more questions and answers.

Unfortunately our Political leaders and the international community in general don't see that something is very wrong here and each day passes by and people young and old continue to suffer and die in great numbers. So "who sinned" that they suffer in this way? The political world continues to search and debates answers. My concern however is that who will real benefit from the answer if and when they come. How many of those people who suffer will still be alive and waiting for the "political answer." How long can the situation be left like this? When will the real answer come, and can there be a shared opinion on the causes of suffering and poverty? There is clear evidence that while the rich nations are quite greedy giving less than 1% of their gross income to poor countries, most poor countries are themselves lead by very corrupt greedy Government leaders who rob the people most of, their well-deserved development resources. So when you ask how shall these problems be resolved, others say never and yet others say, until Christ comes.

CHRIST Came and dwelt among us. "Neither this man or his parents sinned, this happened so that the kingdom of God may be revealed in his life." He then spit on the ground, and made clay with silver and put it on the man's eyes. "Go wash and the man went and came home seeing. CHRIST'S approach is straightforward and heals the person right away. While the disciples continue to ask the questions, Christ has the answer. He wants to make life bearable for all people.

The Path of Jesus, He had compassion and set his mind on ending the man's sufferings. The answer "Neither this man or his parents sinned." can also be understood theologically to mean "All have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God"(Rome's 3:23). In this way let not judge who the sinner is. Jesus shows the disciples how to deal with the question in a positive helpful way for the suffering person. The events are similar to those of the feeding of the five thousand "You, yourselves give then something to eat". The disciples are challenged to provide the answer to their own question.

In the same way, those who profess to be Christian are called by Christ to respond to their own questions about the poor and those who suffer. Christ is saying, "This happened so that the glory of God may be displayed in their lives. We are called to do the work of the one who sent us. We must do it now while it is still day. Night is coming when no one can work." "You are the light of the world" Matt 5:14.

For Jesus, spirituality is about service. Service to those who suffer. This is what he is inviting us to do. We have all seen how the world political efforts are failing to provide the answer and do not help the suffering man. The way of the world will take us too long if not too late to find the answers. The spiritual way is what Jesus inviting us to provide. He says to us “You yourselves provide them with something to eat”. He wants us to be helpful with our questions and not simply as an excuse to run away from the responsibilities facing us. “Who sinned that this man suffering in this way? The answer that Jesus provides is that “we all sinned” that’s why this man is suffering in this way. We all need to do something to help him so that he does not suffer in the way he is. We need to do this now and work hard for that to happen. The passage is a spiritual invitation for all believers to work for peace with justice in the world. It is a challenge not only to pray, but also to pray hard to devote time and energy in the service of people to reduce suffering. Jesus came, dwelt among us and has shown us the path.

The spiritual path - our spiritual journey always begins with a realistic look at ourselves. Jesus teaches us that whatever is happening in the world where many are suffering we are to be the light of the world. Neither this man nor his parents sinned. The truth is that. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Our spiritual journey begins by becoming aware that “we are sinners” I am a sinner and in need of forgiveness. With this kind of openness, we can begin our spiritual journey that leads others and us to Christ. It was rightly pointed out during the seminar “spiritual journey is bases on questions rather than answers.” Why did God allow this to happen, what is God asking of me at this time. When we realize that we have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we long for our God to be reconciled back with us. Christian spirituality is nothing less than wanting to stay connected to the very source of our life, God our creator and sustainer of our lives. Every challenge that we face has its roots in what God wants us to do. Like Jesus, we are called to see, hear, and respond in a loving manner as he did. This will sometimes involve having to work as he did in order to provide healing for others who suffer. Our spirituality can be understood in the manner we understand ourselves in relation to those who need our help. Moreover the Christian understanding of God as a God of mercy and forgiveness forms our understanding of God as a personal God who knows me and wants me to relate to him personally. This knowledge shapes my relationship with this God. I can go to him in prayer anytime and will not be judged but made whole in him. My spiritual understanding always helps me to understand that while I am busy helping others, God will forgive me. “So that it is no longer me who lives, but Christ who lives in me” (See Romans 5). We stop being ourselves. We become Christ to others and do what Christ would have done for them.

It is this knowledge that has kept many from falling away from their faith. In Jesus, they find a personal God to whom they can relate anytime and will be heard. Many people ask me that we hear that the church is growing in Africa why is it so when many are suffering there? Yes, it is true, many are indeed physically and psychologically suffering, they do have a lot of questions about their faith in relation to suffering. Yet they always remember that God welcomes our questions. It is in questions not in answers that we grow in our faith journey. Even if there were answers to so many of our questions, it is only in the Lord where the answers will be found, Hence in time of sufferings we have no where else to seek refuge or find answers, except in God. The African people run back to their Lord for answers. There they take refuge in God. They flee and run to the church. It is there where hope is proclaimed and prayers offered.

There they find peace and joy in the midst of suffering and death. “Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life”. (John 6:68)

The knowledge that “we do not have a permanent place in this world” is biblical and helps them find God in their entire faith journey. “Your words are a light unto my foot”. The word of God is applied and reflected upon in all situations of daily life.

Stages of Prayers In African Christianity

Both seminar time together and the assigned readings offered helpful insights to the above process, which I found to be very helpful.

In a context where people are suffering like that of African, nothing has a central role in the life of a Christian than prayer. The Bishop and Pastors are seen to be models of a prayerful life. This expectation is always there in spite of the fact that leaders do sometimes fail to faithfully lead the people in this process. Like all others, Bishops and Pastors are humans and also fall short of the glory of God. Nevertheless, the challenge is real. We have to lead people in prayer life. As already indicated, the African spirituality is often and mostly rooted in a prayer life. The stages and forms in which this takes place are similar to those demonstrated for us during the seminar.

Stage I (accepting Christ as savior) -Usually very active and discursive. Praising God for sins forgiven in Jesus, and accepting him as Lord and personal savior.

Stage II (advancing faith)- Bible study and meditation focused attention on enlightenment and wish to learn more about the word of God-regular reading and quoting the word of God in the bible especially when tempted or suffering sickness, disease or death of a beloved one.

Stage III (contemplation)- Usually unmoved by events looking to God for all answers and waiting to join the saints those who died in the Lord teaching ways of right living with God. People of prayer and solitude. They stand in Jesus as their pillar not shaking but standing firm in Jesus. Prepared to defend their Christian faith ready to suffer or die their faith in Christ.

Assigned Readings

Henri Nouwen in his book, ‘The way of the heart’ is very right. “Solitude and silence can never be separated from the call to unceasing prayer” ‘The way of the heart’- page 53. This is true in all those stages involving the prayer life of a Christian. The African prayer experience is often associated with both. The more one grows in their faith the more they grow into solitude and silence. In the first stage there is more conversational prayer, which grow into more and more solitude to silence. These stages can clearly be seen and experienced by many professing Christians. “Solitude and Silence are the context within which prayer is practiced”. Page 53. I very much like the way in which Nouwen puts it in his book “Solitude and Silence as the way to unceasing prayer. The prayer of the hesychasts is a prayer of rest. This rest however, has very little to do with the absence of conflict or pain. It is a rest in God in the midst of very intense daily struggle”. Nouwen page 54. As I read Nouwen, I was reminded of our own Evangelical

Lutheran Church “Women’s Prayer” group in Malawi. What the women of prayer do when they wear their uniforms and go about visiting the sick and the prisoners in a special ministry of the church rooted in compassion and service. What they practice may not be traced back to early Western missionaries but rooted in the practices of the early believers.

The Spiritual Disciplines and Ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi “Women’s Prayer Group” also known as “Gulu la amayi a mvano” is understood to be the “Backbone of the Church”. In other words, the Church is able to stand its ground partly because of work and ministry of this group. Almost all women in the church are part of this group. The leaders and some of the women form special ministries of the church as part of the larger group. These are the groups of women who devote more time to prayer and service in the church.

Their activities are guided by their laws and centered around the scriptures under the theme: “you are the light of the world, a city on a hill, you cannot be hidden”. (Matt 5:14).

All their members are required to memorize this verse and recite it when required. Many of their songs also uplift this theme as their main biblical focus. The group’s aims are to deepen spirituality and offer hope through witness.

The major activities include:

a). Bible Study and Prayer Sessions.

Twice or three times a week, the group which is found in all congregations of ELCM will meet to learn the Bible together, sing songs and pray. This is also the time for spiritual reflection confession and reconciliation. They pray for the sick, the poor, and for peace with justice in the world. They have faith and trust in persistence prayer as a way to come closer to God. They look for issues to be prayed for and they find time and energy to take up those issues to God through prayer. Spending time with them when they meet means joining prayer sessions.

b). Visitations and Counseling.

The other days of the week, the group devotes more time to home visitations. This is usually done on Mondays as a follow up to those who did not come to worship the previous Sunday. They visit the home to encourage people particularly women and children to see how they are doing. If for some reason the people did not come to church due to sickness, which is often the case. The group will visit to cheer them with Bible study and offer prayers. Their aim is always to try to win back the backsliders and get them back to church. If in some cases, families are blessed with a gift of a new baby, this group is often there to rejoice with the family. These groups are the people that are always there when they are needed in time of death in the family, they are there accompanying the family throughout the process of burial offering the much-needed counseling. The group sees itself as a Pastoral group and find its strength in the spiritual aspects of the church. Their ministry contributes to both spiritual and numerical growth of the church.

c). Social Services

Even though, very spiritual, the ELCM women's prayer group does have a lot of social responsibilities. They see themselves as equal partners with men and justified by the blood of Jesus to carry out the duties they carry out in church and society. They have a national dress code, which unites them and symbolizes their mission. This uniform is unique. The top blouse is purple, which is a color symbolizing Prayer and penitence in the church. It is also a color for Bishop's clerical shirts in the region. The skirt is Gray. In most African countries Gray paint is not readily available. It is made by mixing black and white paint, half each in a container, in this way you can produce gray. The paint is then no longer white neither is it black any more. Throughout Christian history, black has been known to symbolize dark hopeless situation, while light on the other hand symbolize "day" known or revealed hopeful future. The group therefore adopted "gray" as their local symbol representing them as "women on the journey", they have left "night" and are moving towards "day" but are not there yet. The journey however has begun and is being undertaken. It is a faith journey "moving in transition". Gray is used in the skirt symbolizing "walking" and as headscarfs symbolizing "their thinking" remembering that they are not yet there where the Lord is calling them to be. This Spiritual understanding is based on Paul's letter to Philippians 3:12-16. "It has yet been revealed what we shall be". By faith the journey continues day-by-day trusting the Lord to guide each day.

Other activities within the group and with others

With this theme in mind, the group meets a number of times in a week to learn and teach each other some useful home maker skills e.g. knitting, sawing, embroidery, cookery, baking, and child care. In some groups they even include learning how to read and write as adults. These activities are aimed at women empowerment. We have seen women who knew very little learn or improve their skills to the point that they have gained confidence and become useful contributors in the church and society. While deeply spiritual through prayer, songs and bible study, the group does not shy away from advocating and standing for the marginalized groups in society. While praying for peace with justice, the group stands against violence against women and children and promotes respect for women especially as mothers in the home. They remind fathers to love and care for their families, themselves setting examples by initiating spirituality and persistent in prayer as a life style for those in need. "I will see that she gets justice". (Luke 18:5)... In a local congregation, the group ensures that children are spiritually cared for and not neglected. To ensure this most of them will participate in teaching Sunday school. They teach children some songs and bible verses. This role begins in their own homes where most of them are already loving and caring mothers with a lot of family responsibilities. One of the major responsibilities this group performs is perhaps in preparing young women for marriage also known as "chilangizi". It is a teaching in preparation for a Christian marriage, which is conducted by some leaders of the group with young women who have been proposed for marriage. Their teachings are biblically rooted with prayer as the central focus. Their principal is that, as much as there maybe some good times, marriage is not fantasy. There will be hard times, let alone the whole challenge of raising a family. "Whatever you do my daughter, don't forget to pray" they emphasize. The family is where Spirituality begins. A spiritual mother will care for her family and contribute to a responsible community. Children will grow up into young men and women who fear the Lord. The fear of the Lord will then be the beginning of wisdom. The women's prayer group is indeed a dynamic group within the church. Its ministry is unique and helps to

deepen the spirituality of all of us in the church.

I could write similar things about the spiritual life and ministry of our youth people's group. However for the purpose of this assignment I found the women's prayer group activities to be more appropriate and fitting the experiences of the study.

As we have seen the spiritual symbolism of the women is its uniform which is contextual and has its meaning in what the women's prayer group itself founds to be meaningful. Bradley Holt made a good observation in book *Thirsty for God*, page 9.

He writes "Today Africans are seeking truly indigenous styles of spirituality that do not require them to become culturally Europe in order to become religiously Christians".

No one can express it better than Holt does. We can learn the bible, we can learn church history and we can learn how to be Christians as well as how to pray. No one has a monopoly over these things. They are learned as part of our daily living and spiritual growth. What is important is as Holt puts it, "Christians must just observe that in whatever they do, they do "not lose the centrality of Jesus Christ and the bible as the normative for their spirituality". Holt page 9. Most members of the women's prayer group are not very educated, yet in matters of prayer and spirituality, they lead us, we have a lot to learn from them regarding prayer and spiritual disciplines in the African Church today.

The role of the Bible (The word of God) in African spirituality.

There is an African say, which goes, "No one goes to the garden without a hoe, in the same way no one goes to church without a Bible". Every Sunday the word is read from the bible. When it is time to read, everyone opens their bible and follows along. The Bible remains open until the sermon is over. I recall that there are often two things happening at the same time. Because of the way in which people follow the passages, one is preaching and teaching at the same time. Each word is taken seriously as the word of God speaking to the people gathered. It speaks to the heart and convict the sinner, and yet at the same time it offers forgiveness and reconciliation. The worship service is life giving and renews people to face the daily challenges. "I can hardly wait for another Sunday to come to church" many of them say. When Sunday comes, the churches are full both in towns and cities. There are not enough church buildings and in some cases in most villages people worship under trees or in temporally shelters where there are no benches to sit on, yet the churches are fully packed. People love to worship the Lord. "I was glad when they said unto me- let us go to the house of the Lord" - Psalm 122:1. In most African countries, worship is widely understood as soul feeding. "We have six days to feed our bodily needs, but only one day to feed our spiritual life together. This is why we must read the Bible together and listen together what the Lord is saying to us. People are recognized with their Bibles as they return home from church.

Like worship services, Bible studies and meditations have a central role in the life of a Christian. In Africa and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi, Bible studies and meditations are usually practiced in groups as well as in families. In our study, I found it helpful the way we focused on individual meditation. The stages we went through were similar to those followed by the women and bible study groups in our church. These groups will meet usually once a week. Women on Wednesday's afternoon and the youth on Saturday morning. They will usually warm up beginning songs and then an opening prayer, which leads to a Bible study and meditation. It is a good time for Christian reflection and spiritual growth. The majority of the members attend these bible studies and find spiritual help for their lives. These who for one reason or another were becoming weak in their faith are supported and strengthened.

Stages:

1. Reading of the text:

This is done by a number of people who read verses after verses until the whole text is read and understood. In some cases it may be repeated once or twice just to make sure that all are following. Sometimes, reading is done in turns by the members of the group.

2. Pause:

They usually pause to reflect on the passage to understand it. Silence is observed for sometime. It is time to be focused on the text that has been read.

3. Discussion:

The text is discussed; everyone is free to share what the text has communicated to them. They call this "understanding the text". Questions may be asked as to how each person understands the text. What was the context in which the passage was written, to whom and for what purpose?

4. Sharing:

- What is the law in the passage?
- What is the gospel in the passage?
- What is God saying to us? This is done with a lot of reverence. It is here where Solitude and silence is exercised more often. One or two people might be encouraged to share a short reflection (meditation) what is it that God has spoken to us in this passage today-sharing the word.

5. Prayer:

Silence meditation, spirit centered or spirit lead. Focused speaking by heart and listening by mind leading to clear soul, calm and peace with God. In some cases, a spiritual song is sung slowly and silently as people offer prayers.

In my ministry in the church, there isn't much I enjoy more than joining these groups. I very much enjoy the process, which is the same in and among youth, women and men groups. Participation means renewed strength to go on. Here we grow together spiritually, in spite of various challenges, we are assured of the presence of the one who is more powerful than us. Jesus in whose name we have victory.

Spiritual Discernment:

Of the so many topics we covered at the seminar, spiritual discernment was one of the topics I very much enjoyed. Previously, I did not know much about Christian discernment. The seminar did help me deepen my understanding of the skill of Spiritual Discernment for the Christian leader. Since then I am convinced that Christian leaders need not just good decision making process, but much more, they need good Christian discernment that can lead to good decision making. Spiritual Discernment as I now understand, is simply an art for listening heart. In this process, the heart is able to hear God speak pointing the way to follow. I also enjoyed the emphasis placed on prayer and discernment. Discerning prayer or a prayer that seeks to hear and discerning God's voice is a good prayer. It is a prayer of dialogue with God, which is often practiced by many Christians in the world including the ELCM women of prayer. Since our Kairos Seminar, I have understood it to be a prayer that will point me on the way to God. Now, it is not just a matter of decisions being made and followed, but rather, a matter of waiting and praying together upon the Lord to discern what is truly God's will for his church and us. We will have to practice Spiritual Discernment as part of our Spiritual discipline.

Over the years, I have learned that, in every discipline, there are skills. These skills are usually there, but needs to be trained and disciplined. This is particularly true of the skill of leadership, it is one of the skills, which can be trained and disciplined to become a useful tool. In this course I have again learned of so many of such gifts and skills in which we can train ourselves, of these Prayer and Spiritual discernment are central for the Christian leader. They are a must for good church leadership this is very much so because good church leadership is good spiritual leadership.

Conclusion

Spiritual disciplines and Pastoral leadership was indeed a "Kairos" Seminar for me. Most of the issues and topics we discussed were timely and will be an enriching spiritual experience in my ministry back home. I found the seminar to be very helpful in the manner, which it was offered. We were free to share experiences as well as to explore varieties of spiritual gifts and disciplines that nurture meditative and contemplative prayer as practiced in the tradition and teachings of the church. As already stated, the women's prayer group was always on my mind during the seminar. I was reminded of their prayer life style. I now feel challenged to initiate a similar group for men's group in the church. Learning from the women's and youth groups, they could also strengthen their spirituality. The women and youths are spiritually more active in church than men. Most of the men are weak and behind. This can easily be noticed when visiting congregations in different parishes. I would therefore hope that starting a men's bible study

group may help to waken the spirituality of men in the church. The assigned readings will be a resource that we will continue to be used as I put to practice what we learned together. Henri Nouwen's book, 'The Way Of The Heart', will be one of my spiritual resource tools. I will try to revisit it often and be reminded of his emphasis on silence and solitude as a way to a deepened spirituality in our ministry and service to one another. Thirsty for God and Discerning heart have also left a mark on my life. I will recommend them to those who would like to discover more about spiritual growth. The assigned readings and the seminar itself were a good combination, which can be summarized as a necessary refresher seminar for those in the service of the church in different context. This reflective paper does not in any way try to exhort the whole excise we went through, but tries to simply summarize for me some of the topics and themes we were able to accomplish together during the seminar. We did much more than I could cover in this paper, there was so much we learned together, and I am happy I was a part of the group, and shall very much cherish the experience for some years to come.