

## SPIRIT OF UKAMA

Ephesians 2:14-22

David B. Keller  
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TEXT: Ephesians 2:19 “So you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.”

PURPOSE: To celebrate our Ukama with our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe as a gift from God for the renewing of our faith, the broadening of our love, and the expanding of our vision.

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Ask any of the people who have visited Zimbabwe, or any of the people who have hosted a guest from Zimbabwe, what our Ukama means, and we will be ready with a bunch of stories. We'll also have a word of witness about how our relationship with Christians in Zimbabwe has changed our lives. For that group of people, pilgrims and hosts, Ukama is intensely personal. We have seen things, built relationships, encountered faith which has turned strangers into family and renewed our faith in God's providence.

That accounts for about a dozen people in this congregation. But our Ukama is not between a few people here and a few people there; it is between the First Congregational Church of Concord, and the Harare Church, consisting of the Mbare congregation and the Mabvuko preaching point. Americans are more inclined to operate from an individualistic framework that are our friends in Zimbabwe, so it's more of a stretch for us to experience the corporate connection. But getting that corporate connection is only one of many ways that Ukama enriches us.

The best way for me to draw us into this connection is by sharing its history. I begin with an event that took place one hundred and sixteen years ago tomorrow, which was the founding of the Mount Selinda Mission by what was then the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the global mission agency of the Congregational Churches. Those years were the heyday of overseas mission work. Nowadays, with church budgets in deep deficit and church visions decidedly un-global, it's hard to imagine the enthusiasm and the money which were pouring into mission efforts, not to mention the teachers, health care workers, and technicians who were eager to become missionaries. Our mission effort in the country which then was a British Colony named Rhodesia was but one small piece of an effort spanning Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands. The Mount Selinda Mission boasted a fine teaching hospital, an orphanage, and schooling for children from kindergarten through high school. Within two years, the Congregationalists established a second mission at Chikore, which became one of Zimbabwe's premier institutions for teaching agriculture.

In Zimbabwe as almost everywhere in Africa, people in a sub-region of the country had a distinctive ethnic identity, which included a language and a set of cultural and spiritual traditions. But as people began to migrate within the whole country, they

brought and retained their language, their ethnic traditions, and their religion. The religious tradition which Congregationalists established at Mount Selinda came to Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, in 1954, when the Mbare church was established as the first church of the congregational tradition in that region. Now, churches affiliated with the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe are spread all across the nation, including in Bulawayo, the home in Zimbabwe of our new friends, Hebert and Sibongele.

By the time independence came to Zimbabwe in 1980, the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe was no longer dependent on American Missionary support, although the two historic mission sites still benefitted from the presence of American doctors, nurses, and teachers. But support among American churches for overseas mission work was waning. We were realizing that the ministries we founded in far-flung lands were no longer dependants, but were equal partners, each with gifts to share. At the same time, American churches were experiencing declining membership and declining income. Our concerns shifted from global mission to the renewal of our own congregations, and the overseas ministries which once stirred such great enthusiasm became fading memories, receiving only the interest of isolated pockets of support.

When our New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ voted in 1996 to establish an Ukama/Partnership with the UCC in Zimbabwe, our efforts were consistent with a spirit running through many American churches as well as many overseas partners who began as mission efforts to develop a relationship between equals. The new partnerships recognize that many American churches need what many overseas churches had in abundance, which is exuberant faith, persistent hope, and extravagant generosity practiced in circumstances of deprivation and instability.

So far, this history may not sound all that personal. It may not seem like it is about us. Let me tell you, our friends from Zimbabwe tell this history with a keen sense that it is very much about them and us. Our Ukama/Partnership may be new to us, but what they consistently say is that what's happening now is a resurrection of what had been, and had slipped away.

So this history now connects with First Church. There were a few people here who, back when Ukama was just getting started, had attended conference events promoting the partnership, and had caught the bug. They bugged this congregation's Mission Board and me until October of 2002, when we agreed to partner with a congregation in Zimbabwe. We partnered with the Mbare church because both that congregation and us are the first churches in our respective capital cities.

The relationship started off with a flourish. We sent packets filled with pictures our children had drawn, newsletters, photographs, and letters from members. We got next to nothing in return. The few people here at First Church who were trying to keep the Ukama flame burning went to conference Ukama meetings wondering why our relationship seemed to be going nowhere. There were months at a time when literally nothing happened. For three years, Ukama meant very little to very few people here.

Then, in 2005, as part of our two hundred seventy fifth anniversary celebration, two members of the Mbare congregation visited us as part of a larger delegation from the whole United Church in Zimbabwe. From the witness of our guests, we realized something we could not have imagined: our sister church was very proud of their relationship with us. They were experiencing Ukama even though there was so little personal connection. First Church hosted a closing celebration of that delegation's visit. We combined Zimbabwean drums and shakers with American drums and guitars and sang with such gusto that we knocked the dust off the rafters of this room. Suddenly, Ukama was alive at First Church. The text which sets the theme for today became true in our midst: We were no longer strangers; the two groups had been made into one through Christ, through whom both of us have access in one Spirit to God our common Father. And it really was *us*, not just a few of us. From that event, momentum grew which resulted in seven of us visiting Zimbabwe in 2007, then, three members of the Mbare congregation visiting us in May, and a continuing experience of mutual enriching through our relationship.

So here's the Spirit of Ukama, October 2009: we are not alone. We are united with a people in a far-off land by history, by shared experience, but most of all, by the Spirit of our Lord. The unity which is the Spirit's work sends vibrant faith, unflinching hope, and generous love our way just as surely as we send boxes of books and paper and jackets their way. There is a confidence in the face of uncertainty available to us which comes from partners who have learned how to trust God in the face of incredible adversity.

Christian faith is intensely personal, but it is not individualistic, thank God. The spiritual danger for us Americans is that the dominant culture has become so individualistic that we tend to expect faith to serve our individualism. But Christian faith finds its fulfillment not in "me" but in "we." And the larger our vision of "we," the more vital our faith becomes. We who are worshiping in this place this morning are directly experiencing this much "we" – the people who are right here with us. Then there is a wider "we" to whom we have some connection – the whole of this congregation, including those who are not physically present today. We have a sense of how that wider "we" contributes to the vitality of our faith, because we know how many

of those folks have nourished our faith along the way.

There are even wider “we’s” – connections with neighboring congregations, connections through the United Church of Christ – finally reaching out to the whole company of saints in heaven and on earth. Now we are talking about that line in our Statement of Faith which reminds us that the gift of God’s Spirit binds us in covenant with “faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.”

But Christian faith does not do well with generalities. We may believe that we are connected with all other Christians, but unless that connection gets specific, it doesn’t mean all that much. That is the blessing of our Ukama/Partnership with the Mbare Church. It is one particular group of people, this congregation, connected with another particular group of people. It is their stories mingling with our stories. It is their faith and our faith engaged in mutual enriching. It is us experiencing what was proclaimed in the letter to the Ephesians, Christ creating one new humanity out of two distinct peoples, and in that new humanity, finding greater courage for faithful living.

One more thing from history. 1893, the year that the Mount Selinda Mission was established, was a year of intense economic panic in the United States. In terms of bank failures, unemployment, and general economic distress, it was arguably worse than our current economic crisis. Rather than saying, times are hard, we need to invest in survival, not in outreach, our ancestors in faith launched an ambitious new mission in a far-off land. I wonder what advice those mission organizers would have for us in these anxious times. Our faith is enriched not only by our Ukama with our sister congregation in Zimbabwe, but by our spiritual connection with our own spiritual forbears who show us by example how Christ’s followers practice faith in difficult times.

Now, we are going to sing a few songs which we have received from our partners in Zimbabwe. The words may appear to be more than your mouth can handle. Fear not– it’s actually fun to make these wonderful sounds which put “n’s” next to “y’s” to make a lovely “nya” sound, and put “n’s” in front of “g’s” to make the “ng” sound. Both songs have choruses which repeat, so with a reasonable effort, you might be passably singing the chorus by the last time through. But listen to the tunes– they sound strangely familiar. That’s because our missionaries brought our way of singing to Zimbabwe, and the Christians in Zimbabwe put words to English tunes. These songs express the Spirit of Ukama, our unity in Christ– Western musical structure, African words and expression. So even if you don’t get the words, sing the tunes, and in so doing, let the Spirit which unites us with all God’s people lift your spirit, strengthen your

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faith, and open you to love coming our way from our brothers and sisters who are no longer strangers.