

“Education and Culture Are Equalizing and Neutralizing Forces of Human Interactions” Dr. Gbaba Tells Gbarnga Methodist Grads and Former Students at the Tubman-Gray Alumni Association Dinner Ball



***Speech delivered by Dr. Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba, Sr.
Guest Speaker, Saturday, September 3, 2016***

***Gbarnga Methodist Mission School Alumni Association Convention
At The Savior Abiding Church Eddifice, 10689 Owen Brown Road
Columbia, MD 21044, U.S.A.***

Introduction

Mr. President, officers, and members of the Gbarnga Methodist Mission School Alumni Association, Citizens of Bong County, Liberians, foreign nationals, and friends:

First let me traditionally greet you in Kpelle—the official language of Bong County, Liberia, where the Gbarnga Methodist Mission School is situated: “Kartuah ay”!

Literally, the expression “Kartuah-ay” translates in the English language as: “Good evening”!

This evening I shall be speaking to you on a very important topic that I am very passionate about—education and culture—both of which are complementary. To tell you the truth, I have been in these fields for more than forty-two years. So, when my student Mrs. Irene Roberts-Gulley made her 911 call early Wednesday morning desperately requesting that I serve as guest speaker for the Gbarnga Methodist Mission School Alumni Convention this year, I accepted the 911 call without hesitation for several reasons.

The first reason is because some significant aspects of my life experience and heritage are linked to Bong County. For example, thirty-three years ago I snatched away a beautiful lady and former student of Gbarnga Methodist School and married her in the city of Gbarnga, Jorquelleh District, Bong County, Republic of Liberia. Today we are parents of five wonderful children, three of whom were born in Suacoco District and five beautiful grandchildren, all born in the United States of America. You see, I am a basketballer, so I do my thing in fives—five children and five grandchildren! Also, twenty-one years ago I served on the faculty of Cuttington University and lived peacefully and happily among the people of Bong County in Suacoco District for several years, imparting knowledge unto young Liberians and foreign nationals alike. So, Bong County is my second home in Liberia and I am proud of my Kpelle heritage as a Liberian and African American!

The second reason for accepting your request was because I wanted to give credence to the great work the Methodist Church of Liberia has done and continues to do in the areas of evangelization and education of Liberian youths and adults alike not only in Bong County but throughout Liberia and to seize the opportunity to say “Thank you” to the Methodist Church of Liberia. Also, I would like to congratulate Reverend Dr. John G. Innis, the current Bishop of the Methodist Church and his corps of officers for expanding the mission of the church in the areas of education, health care delivery, and relief services for the war ravished children and citizens and residents in post war Liberia.

The Methodist Church of Liberia has been a pioneer in the provision of quality education in Liberia since its inception in 1822 when the Settlers landed from the United States. It has been a big blessing to all of us, and its educational institutions including Gbarnga Methodist Mission School, the Gbarnga School of Theology, the College of West Africa, Ganta Methodist Mission School, Methodist University, and many other Methodist institutions have produced great minds whose contributions have made a marked difference and impact in our lives.

The third reason for accepting your invitation is because of the natural beauty of the Kpelle people, their warmth, hospitality, humility, and the cultural and historical significance of Bong County in the history and culture of Liberia. Accordingly, I wanted this weekend to be a memorable one for all of us, including foreign nationals that will listen to or read this speech in the media in days and weeks to come. Therefore, I promise that the next couple of minutes that I will be speaking to you will be very educative and culturally relevant, particularly as it relates to the culture and history of the Republic of Liberia, the Methodist Church, the people of Bong County, and the Gbarnga Methodist Mission School now known as Tubman-Gray Junior and Senior High School.

Historical and Cultural Perspective of the Gbarnga Methodist Mission School in Gbarnga, Bong County, Republic of Liberia.

For those out there who think the land on the West Coast of Africa called the Republic of Liberia was founded or came into existence in the early 1800s, you are fooling yourselves. That is not true. Liberia pre-existed many centuries back up to pre-historic era. Based on oral traditional history that was passed down to us, ancient Liberians were descendants of original Africans who migrated from East and Central Africa from the Nile River basin. Most of them were early African Jews and agrarian peoples that formed part of the world's oldest civilizations and ancient kingdoms of Axum, Nubia, Egypt, Songhay, Mali, Ghana, Bene, etc.

Early Liberians and Africans were not pagans as western authors, researchers portrayed them to be. Early Liberians or Africans believed in the practice of monotheism—the belief in the existence of one true God. As a result, there is no plural form of the word God in any of the Liberian languages that I know of; but there is only the singular form of the word God in all of the various Liberian languages. However, if anyone in the audience here tonight or anyone who comes across my speech later is able to disprove this fact, please speak now or rebuke my assertion later if you can. If not, then forever hold your peace!

Accordingly, what I am trying to say to you is that early Liberians acknowledged the existence of God long before the coming of the Settlers or the establishment of the Methodist Church in Liberia in the early 1800s. It was based on this reason that most traditional Liberians later accepted the Christian faith because some of the teachings of Western Christianity resonated with their traditional religious doctrines, such as being one's brother's keeper, the concept of reincarnation, etc. In addition, another important cultural fact about Liberia that I want you to know is that Liberians are divided into three main linguistic groupings: (1) the ***Mande*** speaking group that consists of the Kpelles, Lormas, Kissis, Gbandis, Vais, Mahs, Dahns, Mandingos, Mendes, and Golas; (2) the Kwa linguistic group which includes the Krahns, Krus, Grebos, Bassas, Deiweions, Bellehs, Sapos, Gbis; and (3) the Americo-Liberian/Congor/Creole group that basically speaks the English language as their mother tongue. They constitute less than ten percent of the Liberian population.

However, despite the varied traditional languages that majority of Liberians speak, English is the lingua franca of Liberia—it is the official language of communication, even though over 88% of the Liberian population do not understand, read, write, and speak English

well. So, this is one of the critical problems that we face in Liberia—how to effectively communicate with majority of Liberians in terms of explaining or introducing important government policies and/or the delivery of services to the people.

The Special Qualities and Spirit of Gbarnga Methodist Mission

There is something very special about Gbarnga Methodist Mission that sets it apart from the rest of the Methodist institutions of Liberia, and that unique quality can be precisely summed up as the love of Christ and the love and humility of the Kpelle people. The love of Christ was implanted in 1949 at the Gbarnga Methodist Mission through two distinguished God-fearing missionaries named Ulyses and Vivian Gray. They came with the determined mind to establish an institution that would be a shining example of the love of Christ through the deeds of its students and administrators and all those that come in contact with Gbarnga Methodist Mission. Through their efforts they instilled in each of you the discipline to love and respect others as you would like to be loved and respected.

Further, they encouraged and challenged you to strive for excellence in whatever you do; and all these qualities have been demonstrated overtime through the leadership role that Gbarnga Methodist Mission has played in the field of education and athletics in the hinterland of Liberia. For an example, Gbarnga Methodist Mission has been the venue for the Annual Upcountry Basketball Tournament that attracts thousands of Liberian youths to your campus and that you play hosts to. I am a key witness to this fact.

Besides, the Gbarnga Methodist Mission which was established in 1949 by the Methodist Church of Liberia is situated in the heart of central Liberia, in the City of Gbarnga, Bong County, within the region of the Mande speaking people of Liberia. Therefore, part of your school culture is characteristic of the culture of the Kpelle people of Bong County—hospitality, friendliness, and humility. As a matter of fact, how many of you in the audience know the traditional Kpelle meaning of the word “Gbarnga”? Hands up. Gbarnga Methodist Mission School graduates, how many districts are there in Bong County? I bet, if I asked you how many states are there in the United States of America you would shout in unison and say “Fifty”. But unfortunately, you do not know much about your own history and culture and that’s the typical problem with the Liberian school curriculum. We know about the world but we do not know who we are.

Well, there are eight districts in Bong County: Fuamah, Jorquelleh, Kpkoyah, Panta-kpa, Salala, Sanayea, Suakoko, and Zota Districts. Your Alma Mater falls in the Jorquelleh District. Therefore, it is no coincidence that many outstanding personalities that passed through your walls whether as principals or graduates have risen to prominent heights in Liberian politics and administration due to their connection with the history and culture of Bong County.

For an example, Bennie D. Warner was Principal of Gbarnga Methodist Mission School. He was later elected as Bishop of the Methodist Church and subsequently he became Vice President of the Republic of Liberia during the Tolbert administration. Reverend Arthur Kulah was Director of the Gbarnga School of Theology and when the coup occurred in 1980, he became Bishop of the Methodist Church of Liberia after Bishop Bennie Warner who simultaneously served as Methodist Bishop and Vice President fled into exile. Honorable

Bismark Kuyon was Principal of your school. He later became a member of the House of Representatives of Liberia; and your own Dr. Emmet Dennis is now President of the University of Liberia. Who knows? Maybe after delivering my speech tonight as guest speaker of Gbarnga Methodist Mission School Alumni Association, I might become President or Vice President of Liberia! Only time will tell!

Education and Culture Are Equalizing and Neutralizing Forces of Human Interactions!

Education and culture are equalizing and neutralizing forces of human interactions. This was manifested through the “Meet and greet” gathering last night at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Carter. It was so nice to see relatives and friends that I have not seen for decades and the spirit of comradery you exemplified was beyond description: it shows that education and culture are two very equalizing and neutralizing forces of human life. All I observed last night was men and women hugging each other with love, respect and appreciation! I did not see Liberians divided among themselves as “Country”, “Congor”, “Civilized” or “Uncivilized” people. I did not see Liberians divided among themselves as members of the various warring factions in Liberia: I did not see anyone displaying an NPFL, INPFL, ULIMO, LURD banner. Instead, all I saw were Gbarnga Methodist Mission School graduates and former students laughing, hugging, dancing, chatting, sharing jokes of their days at Gbarnga Methodist, and working together for a common cause in the best interest of their Alma Mater and young Liberian students back home for whom they are raising funds to provide ten scholarships for Academic 2015-16. Above all, I observed patriotic and conscientious Liberians getting together to improve the educational system in Liberia—to express their gratitude to their Alma Mater for making them who they are today.

Conclusion

This is the power of education and cultural knowledge. It empowers us to appreciate one another—to know who we are individually and collectively—and it motivates us to strive to do good unto others as we would have them do unto us. Ladies and gentlemen, my past two days with you the graduates and former students of Gbarnga Methodist Mission School have been very rewarding spiritually, emotionally, educationally, and culturally! I learned so much about your school culture and history than I even knew before and this occasion has benefitted me immensely in terms of making new friends and growing my skills as an educator and cultural expert. I am extremely glad you gave me the opportunity to be your guest speaker and I look forward to serving you in other capacities in the near future. In closing, I want to thank the President, Mr. Kafua Kulah, officers and members of the Gbarnga Methodist Mission School Alumni Association for the honor bestowed upon my wife and me as your distinguished guests. I pray that our relationship will grow to benefit the underprivileged and needy of the Liberian society in years to come. I thank you and God bless.

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