



# An American Church in Paris

by Jonathan Aitken

**T**HE FIRST U.S. CHURCH to be established on foreign soil is having a surprising renaissance. It is the American Church in Paris, which held its earliest services in 1814, becoming officially chartered with the approval of Emperor Louis Napoleon in 1856. Built in solid ecclesiastical-baronial architecture overlooking the River Seine in a prime location on the Quai d'Orsay, ACP has the external appearance of continuing to be the preferred place of worship for well-heeled and waspish expatriates. But the appearance and the past reputation are somewhat deceptive. For the times they are a-changing for ACP, so much so that it is no longer an American church.

ACP still draws a good, indeed a growing congregation of some 650 faithful regulars. Yet two-thirds of them are a polyglot flock of worshippers from all parts of the compass, particularly Africa and the Philippines. This diversity has brought both problems and opportunities. The main consequence is that ACP is in the throes of a search for a 21st-century identity in the variegated English-speaking community of contemporary Paris.

I had a chance to check the spiritual pulse of this community when I made a recent visit to the French capital for speaking engagements at ACP, at an American embassy breakfast, and at other functions attended by pastors, seekers, and business leaders.

The ACP event was an outreach dinner held in the Thurber Room of the church. For the first few seconds after arriving I thought I might have turned up in the wrong place. For I seemed to have joined an international assembly of displaced persons in which Ugandans, Somalis, Kenyans, and Zimbabweans were particularly well represented. Their common denominator was that they spoke English and had

mostly attended Anglican Church schools established in the heyday of the British Empire.

One former resident of Salisbury, a.k.a. Harare, approached me during the supper to ask if I could help him find a copy of the *Ancient and Modern English Hymnal*, from which he quoted with fervor the opening verse of William Cowper's "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." As neither the hymn nor the hymnbook have been in common usage in Britain for at least half a century, I began to glimpse the difficulties ACP might be facing when trying to find a form of worship that reached across all sections of its congregation.

Further problems arose during the Q & A session following my talk on the Psalms. A Russian refugee asked a long and largely incomprehensible question detailing his own or someone else's experiences of incarceration in the Gulag. He was followed by a Chinese-American lady from Shanghai who was having major problems caused by the non-arrival of her Social Security payments. She was an active member of Women of the American Church (WOAC), which once was probably almost as tony a team as Daughters of the American Revolution. But ACP's literature now describes WOAC as "a group of many nationalities and faiths connecting with each other through programs of cross-cultural awareness." Note the plural of the word *faiths*—to which *hopes* and *charities* could safely be added, since ACP needs plenty of all three to handle its diversities.

The relatively new pastor of ACP is the Rev. Scott Herr, formerly a Presbyterian minister in Fort Collins, Colorado; Mexico City; and Zurich. After 19 months in his interdenominational post, which was previously filled by a disconcertingly high turnover of incumbents, Herr seemed slightly bemused



by the scope of his daily challenges. The most unusual request to him was to have been asked if he could supply “a good American wife” by an Ethiopian who thought this might solve his immigration status problems.

The morning after my multicultural yet moving evening at the ACP outreach supper, I was escorted by Pastor Herr to a breakfast at the U.S. ambassador’s home—No. 41 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. This former Rothschild palace is surely America’s most magnificent diplomatic residence. Its historic paintings and furnishings are of such legendary perfection that a 1950s curator of the Louvre is reported to have said to Ambassador David Bruce, “Monsieur L’Ambassadeur, after seeing your house I wish to apologize for the quality of the furniture in the Louvre.”

The breakfast we enjoyed around the beautiful dining room table in the Pontalba Salon of the ambassador’s residence was a top-end event. Attended by bankers, diplomats, captains of industry, and eminent visitors—including Henry Kissinger’s former aide David Young—we tackled the unusual spiritual subject of “Learning from Failure.” The same topic was on the agenda at a businessmen’s lunch in central Paris later in the day.

At both gatherings the guests looked far too sleek and successful to have had anything more than a nodding acquaintanceship with failure. Once again,

however, appearances were somewhat deceptive. For as the conversations opened out into the deep waters of personal sharing, it became evident that many polished facades were but outer carapaces behind which inner turmoils and difficulties were simmering. Here were spiritually hungry people yearning to be fed—but how and where? Is the ACP the right spiritual home for such top-enders?

To your High Spirits columnist, the ACP bears more than a passing resemblance to the early church of Corinth. That too was a mixed and multinational community. “Not many of you were wise, not many of you were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth,” wrote St. Paul in the opening chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:26). His language, however, suggests that some representatives of these elites were indeed in the congregation, even if they were in a minority. Were they made to feel slightly uncomfortable by the polyglot majority? There are signs of some of the same tensions among the old guard of the 21st-century ACP.

There are two solutions to such problems. The first is for any church, perhaps particularly for an American church in a foreign city, to have a vigorous small groups ministry. That way, on the principle of horses for courses, individual members of a large congregation can find their own place in the small group where they feel comfortable. ACP is fortunate to have a new outreach organization to the business community, Leaders Life and Purpose (LLP). Headed by the energetic Denise Dampierre, daughter of the well-known American Christian philanthropist Alonzo McDonald Jr., LLP seems likely to reach out well to the upmarket types who were to be found at the American embassy breakfast.

But if the upmarket ACP members stay aloof from the downmarket churchgoers from Africa and Asia, they will be missing out on a vital part of St. Paul’s and indeed Pastor Scott Herr’s ministry. For the Church of Corinth and the American Church in Paris exist for the same purpose—to be the body of Christ. Sometimes it can be an awkward, incongruous, and difficult body. But its journey of fellow rejoicings and sufferings make it the body and church of God. ✠

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