

---



**BLESSED REFLEX:  
AFRICAN  
CHRISTIANS IN  
EUROPE**

---

**HARVEY C. KWIYANI**

---

# BLESSED REFLEX: AFRICAN CHRISTIANS IN EUROPE

African Christians could play in Europe. Holding the essay together is the argument that non-Western Christians are here in the West and their presence reinvigorates Christianity in many ways. However, for African and other non-Western Christians to be effective in their mission work and help re-evangelise Europe, there is a need for intentional partnering. Re-evangelising the mission field of Europe needs all Christians resident in it — including all non-Western Christians — to participate in God’s mission among its peoples.

## Abstract:

African Christianity in Europe is on the rise, mostly due to the migration of Africans to Europe. Their congregations have emerged in every major city in Europe. The congregations are almost exclusively African in membership, and are generally shaped along national and often tribal identities. Africans have, so far, failed to evangelise and retain non-Africans in their congregations. They are also struggling to engage their own children — second generation African immigrants — in mission. However, their presence in Europe strengthens Christianity even as European Christianity becomes darker in complexion. African Christians bring with them such gifts as a zeal for evangelism and prayer, African theology, and a sense of community — gifts that could help re-evangelise Europe if they can find ways to partner in mission with European Christians.

**Key words:** blessed reflex, mission, *umunthu*, African diaspora, African missionary movement.

## Introduction

This essay explores the missional potential of African Christians and their churches in Europe. It makes use of the author’s long-term involvement with many of these churches and their leaders both in Europe and North America. The essay has two sections. The first section explores some of the general factors behind the rise of African migration to Europe, and consequently, the growing presence of African Christians in Europe. The second section focuses on mission and the missional role that

## African Christian Presence in Europe

There are currently over ten million Africans living in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Most of these come from West African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Senegal; and North African countries including Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> However, a census of African residents in Europe will reveal people from all countries of Africa scattered as migrants in all major European cities. In cities like London – where 14 percent of its 12 million inhabitants are of African descent – it is quite likely that every African tribe and tongue is represented. Every major city, from Dublin to Helsinki, from Oslo to Bern, from Lisbon to Athens, has a considerable resident population of Africans. Most of the Africans from sub-Saharan Africa are Christians, and the easy evidence to their presence is the existence of African migrant churches. A majority of these churches have been started in the 20 years between 1990 and 2010. A small percentage of them are growing — though slowly — mostly through migration of their fellow nationals to Europe and the evangelism of other Africans (also especially of their fellow nationals) already resident in their cities. Most of them are struggling to grow — their target audience is too limited and too saturated. Many have started and closed for the same reasons.

## The Blessed Reflex

Some two hundred years ago, in the early 1800s, as the Protestant missionary movement gained momentum in the wake of William Carey’s work<sup>3</sup> — as many hundreds of European and North American missionaries left the comfort and the confines of their homelands in the West to serve in

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “African” to describe the peoples of African origin — sons and daughters of the African civilisation — who racially speaking, will generally have a brown skin and are politically described as “black” people. However, “African,” here, also includes all those persons who may not racially identify as black but were born or raised in the continent of Africa, or for one reason or another, they culturally identify as African. Included here are people groups like white South Africans, Kenyan Indians, Arab Africans from North Africa, and many others.

<sup>2</sup> Some have come from the West Indies, but this essay focuses on those who have come directly from Africa and are thus called African migrants – a label that is not used for the West Indian people of African heritage.

<sup>3</sup> William Carey published his essay entitled “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens” in 1792 and left for India in 1793 after forming the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). His impact was immediate; within ten years of the formation of the BMS, there were over ten mission societies formed on both sides of the Atlantic.

---

what were at the time unevangelised lands, some spoke hopefully of the day when Christians from those unevangelised lands would come to help invigorate Western Christianity. This, they called *blessed reflex*.<sup>4</sup> It would happen when Christians from lands like Africa and Asia, which had no Christian population at all at the time, would come to be part of the Christian presence in the West, and thereby strengthen Christian witness in Europe and North America. It is not clear how they envisaged this happening. However, before any serious fruit of their missionary efforts had registered, the conversation had shifted from the blessed reflex to Western dominance of the world and the West's colonising instincts had taken over. For the following century, over 20 percent of Europe's population would migrate to the rest of the world; in most cases, dominating and colonising their way through.<sup>5</sup> Now, two hundred years after that conversation, and on the other side of the colonial empires, the blessed reflex is finally here. Numerous non-Western Christians from all over the world are living in Western cities. The concept itself never took off back then, and has remained a subtext in mission history for two centuries; however, the prophetic seeds of that hope never died. The world Christianity that we see today, to a large extent, is a fruit of the work of the missionary movement of the nineteenth century. World Christians living in the Western cities of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand are spiritual descendants of those Western missionaries who went overseas mostly in the nineteenth century. This is the blessed reflex.

The blessed reflex is here. Back in the early 1800s, the chance of such a reflex happening was remote. The reality of Christianity catching on in the other lands was unthinkable. Nevertheless, talk about the blessed reflex undergirded the hope that the lives that were lost at sea and in the heathen lands were not being lost in vain. This, also, was its basis — should a time come in the future when European Christianity would need to be strengthened, Christians from other parts of the world should be able to help. Many of those missionaries, like William Carey in India and Charles Ludwig Krapf in East Africa, endured long lives on the mission field and managed to catch a glimpse of the

potential impact of their work. Others, like David Livingstone in Central Africa, saw only small breakthroughs in converting locals to the faith but nevertheless contributed strongly to mission through geographical exploration. Whatever their work, it was not until the end of the Second World War that the light of world Christianity began to rise on a distant horizon.

The growing presence of non-Western Christians in Europe is a direct result of two main factors, both of which gained a great deal of momentum in the second half of the twentieth century and even more in the last quarter of the century; these factors are the exploding of Christianity in Latin America, Africa, and some parts of Asia, e.g., South Korea, and changing migration patterns. Let us take a brief look at each of these two factors.

## The Rise of World Christianity

The missionary movement that so effectively took many thousands of missionaries from Europe and North America to the rest of the world in the 1800s and early 1900s found itself in a crisis in the years immediately after the Second World War. In the late 1940s the colonial empires began to crack, as many of the colonies were beginning to agitate for independence. As the Western missionary movement had, in many cases, taken advantage of colonialism and had used it as a vehicle for evangelism, the collapse of colonialism threatened to destroy the mission. And by the 1970s, over 75 percent of the colonies had become independent. Many missionaries had returned, many feeling rejected by their own disciples (as many freedom-fighters had been educated in mission schools, of whom the prime example is Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, who was educated in Marist and Jesuit schools). The close alliance between missionaries and colonial agents made it difficult for Africans to separate the two.<sup>6</sup> When political colonialism collapsed, where the missionaries continued to lead, a moratorium was called for. Some Asian and African leaders demanded that the missionaries go home and that the West should stop sending missionaries for a while.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See Kenneth R. Ross, "'Blessed Reflex': Mission as God's Spiral of Renewal," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27, no. 4 (2003). Also see Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 70-72.

<sup>5</sup> Dudley Baines, *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1930*, New Studies in Economic and Social History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on this, see Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: McDowell, 1959). Another interesting read on this part of the history of African Christianity, see Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1971). Both these books are novels and not academic books. They are, however, helpful as they paint an unflattering image of the public perception of the relationship between missionaries, colonisers, and local Africans.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald H. Anderson, "A Moratorium on Missionaries," Chicago, IL: The Christian Century, 1974, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1574>. Also see Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, 64-66.

Difficult as that may seem, the withdrawal of Western missionaries led to an emergence of local missionaries and evangelists who went on to evangelise their countries with a type of effectiveness that foreign missionaries could not manage. Western missionaries had, in many places, managed to translate the Scriptures into local languages. This turned out to be all the local missionaries and evangelists needed to reach their communities.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Africa, before long, Christianity was exploding. African evangelists were converting millions of other Africans every year. Thus, we see world Christianity rising in the second half of the twentieth century, and with it, a worldwide missionary movement. This growth of world Christianity has made possible something that could not happen before; people partaking in God's mission in the world coming from virtually every nation in the world. Most of them work in their own localities, but many others have engaged in cross-border missionary work. Many have crossed continents, even to continents that sent them missionaries two hundred years ago. Mission is finally from everywhere to everywhere. For Africa, we see the rise of African Christianity together with that of the African missionary movement. Many African missionaries work in the continent of Africa, but many others have found their way to other continents, especially Europe.

## Reverse Migration

For the four hundred and fifty years between 1500 and 1950, migration patterns around the world were dominated by the movement of Europeans to different parts of the world, first to the Americas and then to Africa and other continents.<sup>9</sup> This great European migration accelerated in the nineteenth century when over 20 percent of Europe's population relocated elsewhere mostly for economic reasons.<sup>10</sup> While most of them moved to the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, others moved to parts of Africa and Asia. This massive migration enhanced the expansion of the colonial empires and, in most cases, colonialism made the

migrations necessary. The outcome was the spread of Christianity around the world as European Christians migrated. When political colonialism began to crumble, the migration of Europeans slowed down to a trickle. Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, migration patterns changed. Regional migration increased exponentially, such that by 2015, there were over 748 million internal migrants and 232 million international migrants in the world.<sup>11</sup> We live in the age of migration.

Many more started to migrate to the West. Even more, for Europe, there was a need to import human-power to rebuild after the wars had destroyed a generation of young and productive men.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, European countries imported labour from their former colonies. Britain, for instance, invited some people from the West Indies to come help drive buses and dig the tunnels for the London Underground.<sup>13</sup> Now, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, Europe still needs to accept migrants in order to sustain its economy. This is partly because the birth rates of Europeans are lower than what is necessary to keep their populations stable.

## African Migration to Europe

The presence of Africans in Europe is largely an unexpected and unintended outcome of Europe's colonisation of Africa — a piece of African history that spans between 1890 and 1970.<sup>14</sup> By the time the colonies achieved their independence, many people in the colonies had caught a glimpse of a better life in Europe. At the very least, European (or Western) education ensured them access to power and influence in their countries. As such, many Africans began to look for ways to come to Europe to study. Often, governments offered scholarships to promising civil servants and young people to train at European universities. Originally, the hope was for those who came to Europe for education to return to Africa to build their newly-independent states. However, as the promise of a developing

<sup>8</sup> Lamin Sanneh, in his book, *Translating the Message*, has shown that it was actually this translation of the Scriptures that enabled African Christianity to blossom. See Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Missiology Series no 13 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 164-166.

<sup>9</sup> See Frieder Ludwig and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Christian Presence in the West: New Immigrant Congregations and Transnational Networks in North America and Europe* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 408. Enslaved Africans came to be part of this migration, mainly to facilitate the settlement of Europeans in the Americas by providing free labour.

<sup>10</sup> Baines, *Emigration from Europe*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> International Organisation for Migration, "World Migration Report 2015: Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Mobility." Can be found at [http://publications.iom.int/system/files/wmr2015\\_en.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/system/files/wmr2015_en.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Sturge, *Look What the Lord Has Done!: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> The first arrived in 1948 on SS Windrush from Jamaica, and have been referred to as the Windrush Generation ever since. For the next two decades, many people from the Caribbean Islands arrived in Britain, and since then, the population of people of African-descent in Britain has continued to grow.

<sup>14</sup> Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 169-172.



---

Africa started to fade, many stayed in Europe (and invited their families and some relatives to join them). As the years passed, the general political atmosphere of Africa became less hopeful and the economic situation became more gloomy.

Consequently, many more Africans migrated to Europe. In the ensuing decades, political stability has remained elusive. Many freedom fighters became dictators and their infant democracies turned into dictatorships. Today, over fifty years after independence and more than 150 *coup d'états* later, many feel there is no hope for them in the continent and are willing to risk anything to travel to Europe. The gap between the rich and the poor has continued to grow while corruption and abuse of power are rampant in government institutions. Indeed, poverty and disease, political conflict and civil war, natural disasters and famines, and corruption and bad governance, among many concerns, stand in the way of many young Africans wanting a better life for themselves and their children. The Mediterranean Sea continues to be a mass grave for thousands of Africans who drown every year as they attempt to enter Europe where they are generally not welcome.

Many more Africans spread around the West (including Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand) largely because even though they are not welcome, they are treated better than in other parts of the world. The West is generally more accepting and humane — especially because of the respect for human rights. However, since the turn of the century, migration to Western countries has become difficult.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Africans have started exploring migration to other non-Western countries. Many are now migrating to China, India, Latin America and even Russia. However, living conditions for African migrants in many of these countries are generally said to be extremely difficult. In most cases, the racism that is experienced in some of those places makes them continue to try to move to Western countries.

## African Christianity in Europe

Religion plays a very big role in the life of African societies. John Mbiti's declaration that Africans are notoriously religious is still as true today for most African cultures as it was when he published it in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> When Africans migrate, they bring their religions (whatever they are) with them. For instance, most Francophone Africans living in

France have come from Islamic countries in West Africa, and they bring their Islam with them. Some have even brought their traditional religions along. However, it is Christianity that has been exported the most in African migration. Part of the reason for this is that Africa as a continent is going through a Christian revival — with ten million new conversions every year for the past fifty years. Christians now comprise almost 50 percent of Africa's population, a huge rise from 10 percent one hundred years ago. In addition, some scholars believe that the immigration laws of most Western countries are more favourable towards Christians, such that most of the Africans settling in Europe are Christians and not Muslims.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the reason, when Africans migrate, they bring their Christianity along.

African Christians exist in Europe as a result of this general migration pattern that sees thousands of Africans enter Europe every year. Just like the Europeans who left Europe in the nineteenth century, most African migrants — including asylum seekers — have come to Europe for economic reasons; to work, to study, and to have better standards for their families. Apart from a handful of occasions, we are yet to see African Christians coming to Europe as missionaries. We are also yet to see African churches in Europe engage with their new contexts in a missional relevant manner. Nevertheless, the presence of African churches is growing in Europe. For instance, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a Pentecostal denomination from Nigeria, has close to 720 congregations in Britain, and continues to plant over 25 new churches each year. The Church of Pentecost (CoP), another Pentecostal denomination from Ghana, has 130 congregations in Britain and plants, on average, 10 churches per year. Both these denominations planted their first congregations in Britain in the 1980s, and as such, are growing rapidly in a context where Christianity is generally on the decline. The RCCG and the CoP are the two largest African denominations operating outside Africa. However, there are many other smaller networks and denominations that are growing their churches in the Diaspora, e.g., the Deeper Life Church, Christ Embassy, Christ Apostolic Tabernacle. A typical African congregation in Europe will be fairly small — having 20 to 30 members. In large cities like London, there are several African churches with a few thousand members. However, very few African churches in Europe will grow beyond 150 members. One of the reasons for this is *strategy*;

---

<sup>15</sup> Immigration is always a difficult political topic at every election in almost every country in Europe and the wider West.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 307-308.

---

they tend to have many small churches instead of a few large churches, and in doing so, saturate Europe with their churches. The RCCG's mission statement suggests that it seeks to "plant churches within five minutes' walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes' driving distance in every city and town of developed countries."<sup>18</sup>

African Christianity in Europe is in its fifth decade. The first African churches appeared in Europe in the 1960s. However, their congregations continue to remain an exclusively African phenomenon in Europe as populations of Africans in Europe increase. Their membership is often over 90 percent African. They are even divided along national and tribal lines; there are Ghanaian churches, Nigerian churches, Kenyan churches, Yoruba churches, Kikuyu churches, etc. For example, 97 percent of the 16000 members of the Church of Pentecost in the UK in 2015 identified as Ghanaian, with an Akan majority. The statistics for the Redeemed Christian Church of God in the UK are not too dissimilar, where over 90 percent of the 150 thousand members were Nigerian (and mostly Yoruba) at the end of 2015. Very few can include foreign nationals among them. Nevertheless, as Africa's Christianity grows and as Africans continue to migrate to other continents, the continent of Africa will contribute greatly to world Christianity. In some cities in Europe, Africans are slowly becoming the face of Christianity. For instance, in 2010, over 60 percent of people who went to church on any given Sunday in London were African and Caribbean migrant Christians – most of whom are members of African churches or other African Majority churches.<sup>19</sup> Thus, people of African descent, who form only 14 percent of London's population, make up 60 percent of church attendance in the city. Of course, the largest congregation in Europe is the Embassy of God Church in Kiev, Ukraine, which is led by Sunday Adelaja, a Nigerian. It claims over 25,000 members. Its impact in Ukraine and surrounding countries has been tremendous. The second largest congregation in Europe, which is the largest in the UK, is Matthew Ashimolowo's Kingsway International Christian Centre in London. It claims to have over 12,000 members.

## Mission and African Christians in Europe

African churches in Europe have *so far* been very successful only in evangelising fellow Africans. A very small portion of them have made any inroads reaching Europeans. Many say it is too difficult to reach out to Europeans. Many have told me, "It forces us to do things differently, and that is too uncomfortable." By "doing things differently," they mean such things as having shorter worship services or having to embrace relational evangelism. For these pastors who at least want or try to engage in mission among Europeans, their presence in Europe makes them believe they have to be missionaries to Europeans. As such, they try to contextualise their ministries for Europeans, experiencing very little success along the way. Most of them lack the training that would enable them to understand what cross-cultural mission to Europeans should look like.<sup>20</sup>

Others have made up their minds to reach Africans only, saying God has called them to *this* specific people group in the West. For these, there is no need to contextualise their ministries for Europeans. The hard work of cross-cultural ministry is of no interest to them. They live in a bubble of African Christianity in Europe and have no plans to connect with even the wider Body of Christ in their neighbourhoods. Many in this camp focus their ministries on church growth and have embraced Donald McGavran's homogenous unit principle.<sup>21</sup> For them, it is easier to grow churches if they focus on their fellow nationals and, if necessary, other Africans.

However, over the years, I have observed that most African pastors in Europe talk the language of mission fluently but carry out their weekly ministries as if they are only interested in reaching Africans. Very often I hear them say, "God brought us here for a purpose, we are the missionaries that God has called to Europe for such a time as this." When I visit their churches, I hear them say, "it is too difficult to evangelise Europeans, they don't like us anyway, so we will let them be as we try to grow our churches the easiest way possible — focusing on our fellow nationals and other Africans."

---

<sup>18</sup> Redeemed Christian Church of God, 'Mandate', <http://www.rccguk.church/mandate/> consulted August 2016, consulted August 2016.

<sup>19</sup> The common term used to describe these churches in Britain is "Black Majority Church." I avoid it here because of its racial undertones.

<sup>20</sup> In response to this need for context-sensitive cross-cultural mission training, we have put together an initiative called Missio Africanus whose focus is to provide such training to African as well as other non-Western missionaries working in Europe. More on this at [www.missioafricanus.org](http://www.missioafricanus.org).

<sup>21</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 223-244.

---

Generally speaking, this explains why most African churches in Europe have no non-Africans in their membership. This has serious implications for how we talk about mission in the African Diaspora. Many African pastors feel they do not even need to try engaging with Europeans because, as they say, “the success rate is too little, it is negligible.” Giving up on mission to Europeans is, I believe, nothing but abdicating the future of their churches in Europe because migrant congregations generally do not survive more than two generations. Already, the greatest challenge currently facing African church leaders in Europe is the “faith of the second generation.” Many African pastors are able to establish small vibrant churches that are shaped by their African cultures that attract other first-generation African immigrants; but their styles and strategies fall apart when it comes to reaching their own children. Many are beginning to realise that once their children leave home — either for university or just moving out to be independent — they either go to other Western youth-oriented churches or stop going to church altogether.

Second-generation African migrants are not very keen on staying in their parents’ churches. They would rather go to other contemporary or youth-culture churches (like Hillsong) where they will feel more at home and meet other young people who share their passions and culture. A majority of them become members of these youth-culture churches, while a small percentage leave the church altogether.

That second-generation African immigrants are not staying in their parents’ churches should not be a surprise. The younger Africans in Europe are European, culturally speaking, and just like Europeans find it difficult to stay in African churches, so do young Africans who have grown up in the Diaspora. Their parents’ churches are shaped for a different audience, such that when the younger African migrants visit them, it feels as though they have entered a foreign culture; the services are an immense cross-cultural experience to them. For many, their parents’ African churches are usually the only mono-racial gatherings that they attend. Everywhere else they go, be it at school or at work, they experience life as a multicultural event. Therefore, they find their parents’ churches

very strange. Consequently, African church leaders in Europe will do well to notice that their Christianity needs to be translated into something non-Africans can relate to, whether those non-Africans are their European neighbours or their own children raised in Europe.

## What Would Effective African Mission in Europe Mean?

Africans must engage in mission in Europe, not just because the context of Europe needs them to do so, but also because “the church is missionary by nature.”<sup>22</sup> To stop engaging in mission means to deny themselves their identity as co-workers with Christ in the mission of God in Europe. Furthermore, they have to choose the hard road of actually doing their best to engage Europeans in mission rather than following the homogenous unit missiology. They need to do this because the legacy of their ministerial work in Europe depends on it. They come to Europe bearing gifts that only they can bring, and when put to good use in a contextually relevant manner, they could help re-evangelise Europe. For the remainder of the essay, I will explore four ways in which African Christians could contribute to mission in Europe.

## Evangelism

African Christianity is deeply evangelistic in nature. On the one hand, this is because most African Christians still live in close proximity with those who have not heard the gospel — relatives, neighbours, and others in traditional religions — and have the urgency to share the good news. On the other hand, there has been a great influence in Africa from Pentecostal and evangelical theology which places a great emphasis on the Last Judgment and hell and the need to save as many people as possible before it is too late. Such theologies emphasise that it is every Christian’s duty to plunder hell and populate heaven by converting many people — getting them to be born again — from other religions or from nominal Christianity before death or the day of judgment.<sup>23</sup> Most African churches in Europe have brought this evangelistic zeal along. They distribute tracts on the high street. They engage in door-to-door evangelism. They pray for miracles. Thus, they engage in evangelism on a constant basis, but they

---

<sup>22</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series no 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 372.

<sup>23</sup> This is a title of one of Reinhardt Bonnke’s early biographies, Ron Steele, *Reinhard Bonnke: Plundering Hell and Populating Heaven* (Sovereign World, 1986). It outlines his evangelism, philosophy and strategy. It was written mainly for the African audience which, until its publication in 1986, was the focus of his ministry. It also reflects the general convictions of the many Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in Africa who were encouraged to evangelise to save as many as possible from the impending judgment.

use the strategies that were successful in Africa, and then get frustrated when they fail to see conversions like they did in Africa. To their credit, however, they do this in the European context where most Christians do not engage in evangelism at all. Of course, after centuries of seeing no need to evangelise within Christendom, most of Western Christianity lost its evangelistic edge. Today, even with the new ecclesiological conversations in Europe and North America (like missional church, emerging church, fresh expressions, and others), many still have no idea about how to evangelise — especially how to evangelise fellow Westerners. This is one area in which missional partnerships between Africans and Europeans could be of much help. The Africans have the zeal to pray and evangelise, while the Europeans may have a better grasp of the cultural gap that needs to be bridged in order to connect with the people. If we put these two together, we may have what we need for European Christianity.

### Theological Cross-pollination

African theology, when truly done using African cultural lenses, will have different points of emphasis from Western theology. For instance, for Malawians, an attempt to think about *missio Dei* in Malawian terms uses *umunthu* theology which emphasises the humanising effect of God’s mission, expressing itself in generosity, both of God and of Christians too, to those in need.<sup>24</sup> For Malawians, *missio Dei* is about God humanising us. The Triune God, the Great *Munthu*, came to earth in the Person of the Son, Jesus Christ, to restore human beings to their full humanity—personhood, *umunthu*—and give them life in abundance. The Pauline corpus suggests that the culmination of this humanising begins with regeneration, whereby the Spirit (breath, Gk. *pneuma*, Heb. *ruach*,) of God brings the human spirit to life. Paul testified to this when he said, “we were once dead in our sins ... but God made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:1-7, my paraphrase). Peter added, “you were once not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:10, NIV). Thus, the real *umunthu* begins with salvation; the secular *umunthu* is only a shadow of the *umunthu* that is made possible by Christ. When everyday acts of *umunthu* are undergirded by

prayers and faith, they become anointed avenues through which God’s Spirit draws people to God’s humanising love. This humanising principle of *missio Dei* rightly extends the concept of salvation in Africa to include many ways in which life and personhood is shared. Many scholars have shown how salvation in Africa is more than the saving of the soul.<sup>25</sup> Salvation, even in its Greek translation, *sozo*, includes healing, deliverance, blessing, empowerment, liberation, feeding, clothing, etc.<sup>26</sup> All these are humanising acts through which people can have the abundant life that Christ gave to humankind. In all these acts, plus many others, Christian witness is made and the Gospel is shared, even sometimes without proclamation. This, for Africans, is the *missio Dei*.

When foreign theologies like *umunthu/ubuntu* theology are brought into conversation with Western theology in a mutually critiquing and edifying way, they are both enriched and expanded. Instead of dismissing one another, or even trying to convert one another, African and European Christians could listen to one another to discover new ways of understanding God. For instance, in Europe today, this humanising generosity could provide a missional lens through which to discern how to respond to the challenge of refugees and migrants.

### Ecumenism and Engaging Other Faiths

Contemporary African Christianity (which has effectively emerged in the past century) has always existed in the milieu of other religions. For most of its existence, it has been a numerically powerless minority. It knows what liminality feels like as both Islam and other Eastern and traditional religions have always competed for adherents in Africa. It was not until 1981 when Christians surpassed Muslims in Africa since the coming of the missionaries in the 1800s. Thus, in the process of its growth, African Christianity has always had to deal with religious and cultural pluralism on a regular basis. For Europe, both religious pluralism and cultural diversity are fairly new — having become more pronounced in the context of post-colonialism and post-Christendom. Current political

<sup>24</sup> *Umunthu* means personhood or humanness. It is Malawi’s vernacular for the South African term, “*ubuntu*.” In essence, *umunthu* says that personhood is only possible in belongingness. Thus, “I am because I belong.” See Harvey C. Kwiyani, “*Missio Dei: An African Appropriation*,” *Missio Africanus: The Journal of African Missiology* 1, no. 1 (2015). Also Gerard Chigona, *Umunthu Theology: Path of Integral Human Liberation Rooted in Jesus of Nazareth* (Balaka: Montfort, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Manas Buthelezi, “Salvation as Wholeness,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> The Greek word σωζω or sozo (Strong’s Gk. 4982) is translated to save, to make whole, to deliver, to make well, to heal, to preserve, to keep safe, among many other variations.



---

attitudes towards migration and diversity suggest many wish they could go back to the time before non-Westerners arrived (with their cultures and their religions). Even within Christianity, there are huge gaps between denominations and races. Most African Christian leaders will have some experience in inter-religious dialogue. Many grew up with neighbours of other religions. Their experience and understanding of Islam, for instance, will be of great value as European Christians try to figure out how best to relate with their new Muslim neighbours. So, this is yet another area where Africans could play a vital role in mission in Europe.

## A Return to Community

One of the greatest challenges facing Westerners is lack of community – which is one of the negative effects of individualism (which, of course, is not just an outcome of social disconnectedness in society, but also economic systems that capitalise on the individual to make maximum profit). Loneliness as a problem has reached epidemic levels in some parts of Europe, especially among the elderly.<sup>27</sup> In my work with an RCCG congregation that was trying to discern what God was calling them to do in their community in London, we discovered that within a radius of half a mile around the church, there were many elderly single people who lived alone and felt as though society had forgotten them. When we visited a few of them, we quickly realised that the primary need was companionship. The congregation worked with the City Council to authorise their members to visit some of these lonely people, to take them shopping or to other social events. Before long, the congregation had embedded itself in its community through what they called a befriending ministry.

Most Africans are communal in their outlook. They believe in *ubuntu* – which says “I am because we are.” The proverb that says, “if you want to go fast go alone, but if you want to go far, go with others” is something that most Africans take seriously. In Europe, Africa’s *communalism* will be the antidote to the individualism that shapes life. In our age of relational evangelism, one of the most important tasks of the church is to be able to form authentic missional communities of faith. Community and belongingness happen to be some of the major needs of Westerners – and we have Africans here who can help discern how best to do that. This, too,

is an area where Africans can play an important role in mission in Europe.

## Conclusion

The blessed reflex is here. Non-Western Christians are here to invigorate Western Christianity. As such, African Christianity will continue to exist in Europe as long as African migration to Europe continues. However, a majority of African Christians in Europe have not yet successfully engaged Europeans in mission. They have not even engaged the faith of their children effectively, seeing as it requires cross-cultural efforts. For most of them, the work to do this is too difficult and yields minimal results. However, they cannot give up on mission among Europeans, as the same tactics will be needed to engage their own children — second generation African immigrants in Europe. To help them engage effectively in mission in Europe, there is a need for European Christians to engage African Christians as partners in mission – something beyond renting out their church buildings for services. For instance, it may be possible for European and African Christians to collaborate in planting a church that is multicultural from the start. The two have complementary gifts, skills, worldviews, and theologies. If they work together, they may be able to try something in Europe that, I believe, has not been tried yet, and who knows, this may be a new key to the evangelisation of Europe.

---

<sup>27</sup> For instance, see the Mental Health Foundation’s report on the effects of loneliness in British communities, “The Lonely Society?” For an American perspective, Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1996). Also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

## Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: McDowell, 1959.
- Adogame, Afeosemimo U. *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Anderson, Gerald H. "A Moratorium on Missionaries." Chicago, IL: The Christian Century, 1974, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1574>.
- Baines, Dudley. *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1930*. New Studies in Economic and Social History. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Bellah, Robert Neelly. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California, 1996.
- Beti, Mongo. *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1971.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. American Society of Missiology Series no 16. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Buthelezi, Manas. "Salvation as Wholeness." Chap. 9 In *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, edited by John Parratt. London: SPCK, 1987.
- Chigona, Gerard. *Umunthu Theology: Path of Integral Human Liberation Rooted in Jesus of Nazareth*. Balaka: Montfort, 2002.
- Chike, Chigor. *The Holy Spirit in African Christianity: An Empirical Study*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016.
- Hanciles, Jehu. *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.
- Kwiyani, Harvey C. "Missio Dei: An African Appropriation." *Missio Africanus: The Journal of African Missiology* 1, no. 1 (2015): 53-63.
- Kwiyani, Harvey C. *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*. American Society of Missiology Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014.
- Ludwig, Frieder, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu. *African Christian Presence in the West: New Immigrant Congregations and Transnational Networks in North America and Europe*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970.
- McGavran, Donald A. *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Ross, Kenneth R. "'Blessed Reflex': Mission as God's Spiral of Renewal." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27, no. 4 (2003): 162-168.
- Sanneh, Lamin O. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. American Society of Missiology Series no 13. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.
- Steele, Ron. *Reinhard Bonnke: Plundering Hell and Populating Heaven*. Sovereign World, 1986.
- Sturge, Mark. *Look What the Lord Has Done!: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain*. Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2005.

### HARVEY C. KWIYANI

Harvey Kwiyani teaches African Christianity and theology at Liverpool Hope University. He is also a Church Mission Society mission partner working in mission education in Britain. He leads the work of Missio Africanus. Email: [harvey@missioafricanus.org](mailto:harvey@missioafricanus.org)

