

EXPLORING ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES FACED BY AFRICAN MISSIONARIES IN BRITAIN: THE CASE OF THE CHURCH OF PENTECOST

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Abstract

This essay discusses adaptive challenges that face African Christians in their mission efforts in Britain. It focuses on the issues of cultural adaptation, racial prejudice, and government policy on immigration as the three significant challenges that African immigrant churches need to learn to negotiate in order to be effective in mission in Britain and to establish churches that will outlive the first generation immigrants.

Keywords: adaptive challenges, cultural transformation, mission, African churches in Britain.

Introduction

This essay explores some of the adaptive challenges that are experienced by African Christians, ministers, and missionaries attempting to be effective in their work in Europe. The essay focuses on the experiences of some ministers of the Church of Pentecost (CoP) in Britain. Using a phenomenological approach, it explores the issues of life and mission among Ghanaian Christians of the Church of Pentecost in Britain. Among many issues, it focuses on

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three that appear to be of greater significance to the authors, and these are: culture, immigration politics, and discrimination. The essay finishes with a brief discussion on how Ghanaian Christians can best respond to these challenges.

Double Explosion: Christianity and Migration

Any twentieth-century history of Africa has to highlight two great phenomena that occurred in Africa in the last quarter of the century. The first is the explosion of Christianity both on the continent and, consequently, in Africa's diasporas around the world. The second is the increasing tide of African migration to the West and the rest of the world.

Regarding Africa's Christian explosion; in 1900 Africa had a population of 133 million people, and only 9 million of these were Christians (6 per cent of the population). Fast forward to 2015, and Africa has no less than 525 million Christians out of 1100 million (1.1 billion) people.¹ Thus, over 50 per cent of Africa's population is Christian, at least in a nominal sense. This kind of growth was unexpected and is unprecedented in church history. When the World Mission Conference took place in Edinburgh in 1910 there was no expectation that Christianity would grow on African soil. The future of Christianity in Africa looked so bleak that it warranted neither a careful and focused conversation nor the presence and participation of Africans.² Delegates representing Africa included expatriate *Western* missionaries and eight white South Africans only.³ When Africa was discussed at the conference, it was with a pessimistic tone – the leaders in world mission in those days believed that Africa would become a Muslim continent.⁴ Of course, consequently, they dedicated most of their energy to other parts of the world. However, God had another plan.

Only God could imagine transforming the continent and adding over 500 million new Christians to the African church in slightly over 100 years. For the first half of the century, Christianity continued to grow at a steady pace. There were around 100 million Christians in Africa in 1960. It was not until the end of the political colonisation of Africa in the 1960s that a miraculous explosion started to happen. By 1970, when all but a few of the formerly colonised lands had gained their independence, Christianity had

1 The Pew Research Centre produced a report entitled "The Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population in 2010 suggesting that 62.7 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's population is Christian, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>.

2 Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 7.

3 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 7.

4 Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 15.

close to 150 million followers and adherents in Africa.⁵ After 1970, everything changed; African evangelists, pastors, and prophets started to aggressively preach the gospel to fellow Africans, propagating a type of Christianity that was more relatable to the African mind; in addition to the many African Independent Churches that had emerged earlier, another African type of Christianity emerged within the “missionary churches” that sought to do away with the robes of the colonisers and Western missionaries. Since then, the Lord has added an average of 10 million new Christians to the African church every year. The impact of that sudden explosion of Christianity in Africa is only now beginning to show and, we believe, will be felt all around the world for generations to come. The statistical centre of gravity of Christianity is now located in Africa, and this will shape the religious landscape of the world for a long time.⁶ One major factor in this will be the spread of African Christians around the world and the ensuing *diasporisation* of African Christianity.

The explosion of African *migration*, both within the continent and to many other parts of the world, will only be discussed in passing here.⁷ This essay is only interested in the *effect* of the migrations in the dispersing Africa’s Christianity to other continents. Africans have always travelled outside the continent, even before enslaved Africans were taken to the Americas. However, when the political colonisation of the continent came to an end in the 1960s, a highway started to emerge, making it possible for Africans to migrate, first to the countries that colonised them, but later to any other country that allowed them the opportunity. That migration which started as a trickle in the 1950s has now become a mighty river. Every year, thousands of sons and daughters of Africa risk everything to leave the continent to gain entry into China, Europe and North America. Many thousands will cross the seas for further education or better jobs, while others are escaping the hopelessness that seems to characterise the continent. Every African country on the continent has a good portion of its population living in the diaspora.

As Christianity continues to grow on the continent, most of these African immigrants dispersing around the world are Christians. When they move, they carry their Christianity along with them and form African immigrant congregations wherever they go. These two factors, (1) the growth of African

5 For a more detailed study of the development of African Christianity in the 20th Century, see Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity, 1950–1975*, African Studies Series 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Also, see Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450–1950*, The Oxford History of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

6 Todd M. Johnson, Kenneth R. Ross, and Sandra S. K. Lee, *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

7 For detailed attention to the subject of African Christian migration, see Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

Christianity and (2) the growth of African migration, have made possible the emergence of African Christianity in the diaspora. Most immigrant Christians have the desire to reach their new neighbours for Christ, but they soon realise that “what worked in Africa does not work here.” They have to adapt their ministries to their new contexts, but that is the most difficult thing to do. Let us look at how the Ghanaian denomination of the Church of Pentecost is coping with the adaptive challenges they face in trying to minister to the British.

The Church of Pentecost: a Brief History

Kwiyani, one of the authors of this essay, has often described the Church of Pentecost as one of Ghana’s best-kept secrets. It is the largest Protestant church in Ghana with about 3 million members scattered around the world. It is registered in 92 countries and the list continues to grow every year. However, despite its global presence, the church is little known outside West Africa. The CoP originates from Ghana, but has its roots in the Welsh Pentecostal tradition. It was founded by an Irish missionary of the Apostolic Church of Great Britain, Reverend James McKeown.⁸ He was sent to the Gold Coast from the Apostolic Church of Bradford in 1937 at the invitation of a local Pentecostal leader by the name Peter Anim. The Church of Pentecost seceded from the Apostolic Church of Great Britain in 1953, and has since grown to over two million members in Ghana alone.⁹ In Britain, the CoP currently has about 15 000 members in 130 congregations. A great majority of the members are from Ghana. However, the CoP has become very intentional about reaching non-Ghanaians with the gospel in order to internationalise the church. Thus, as an immigrant denomination in Britain, the CoP is currently wrestling with the adaptive challenges facing every such movement, trying to be missionally relevant to the British context.

Adaptive challenges Faced by African Immigrant Churches

Adaptive challenges occur when an organisation’s survival strategies – the values and practices that have made it possible for the organisation to succeed and thrive – can no longer match its context. This can happen when a powerful competitor emerges, or when a sickness attacks that demands a lifestyle change, or even when a congregation’s neighbourhood changes; or, as is the case in this essay, when a Ghanaian church finds itself in Britain.

8 Christine Leonard, *A Giant in Ghana* (Chichester, West Sussex: New Wine Ministries, 1989).

9 For the history of the CoP, see Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*, Studies in African Pentecostal Christianity 1 (Accra, Ghana: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 2001).

At that point, the organisation's deeply held beliefs are challenged, forcing it to rethink its goals and to transform its strategy to fit its current circumstances. Responding to adaptive challenges always involves changing people's beliefs, values, or traditions to move them towards a desired end. Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez define adaptive challenge as something that will require the church to move towards a future that it cannot yet see, to become something different, to learn things it does not yet know, and to innovate beyond its current imagination.¹⁰

The other type of challenge is a *technical challenge*. These are generally simpler to deal with as they can be resolved without the 'lifestyle' or 'cultural' changes required as in the case of adaptive challenges. Technical challenges can be dealt with using quick fixes. For instance, a congregation can start a second service if their church hall is getting too small. However, adaptive challenges take longer to fix, and can only be effectively fixed if congregations make some changes in the way they do church. For instance, we have observed that most immigrant congregations have problems keeping their children engaged in church after they finish high school. In our opinion, this is an adaptive challenge that requires an adaptive solution. However, we have noticed that many congregations approach it as a technical problem, and their responses include starting a youth church that simply repeats what the older congregation does, only with a younger membership.

Approaching this problem as an adaptive challenge will involve a different methodology. Churches may have to begin to embrace youth culture, different music, and appoint younger members to leadership positions. They may begin to do discipleship differently to equip their younger members for ministry (and not just youth ministry). Whatever they do, they realize that applying technical solutions to adaptive challenges never really works. It is like applying a sticking plaster to a fractured bone.

We will now turn to three major adaptive challenges that we believe African immigrant churches must negotiate in order to be effective in mission in Britain; these include: (1) culture; (2) government policy on migration; (3) discrimination. These three were identified after extensive conversations with African pastors in the Birmingham area. All three challenges were mentioned by almost all of the twenty pastors whom we interviewed.

Culture

A majority of African immigrant Christians experience a massive culture shock upon their arrival in Britain. In many ways, British culture is very different from what they were used to in Africa. It is usually different from what they

10 Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 222.

expected it to be when they started their journey. Talcott Parsons and Edwards Shils point out that culture is “the patterned and interconnected system of ideas and beliefs, symbols and feelings and values.”¹¹ Clyde Kluckhohn observes that, “Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, and believing.”¹² The ideas, beliefs, symbols, feelings and values in Britain are very strange to many newly arrived Africans even after all the cross-cultural preparation they undergo before leaving Africa – if at all they get any. Emmanuel Yartekwei Lartey points out that, “No amount of intellectual preparation or visiting can fully prepare one for living in a different culture.”¹³

Most African Christians in Britain experience culture shock on their arrival because being a foreigner requires people to explore new ways of making meaning in society as the old cultural landmarks are no longer helpful. Andy Hardy and Dan Yarnell suggest that, “The significant differences that exist between Western secular culture and non-Western ones do not make it easier for non-Western Christians who have come to live in the West.”¹⁴ Learning a new language (or the nuances of British English), getting used to British food, and negotiating power dynamics and interpersonal skills in Britain present a daunting task. Kwiyani observes that since African culture is generally communal, Africans are “relationship-oriented in their approach to life, ministry, and mission. [Western] individualism does not make sense to many Africans.”¹⁵ Thus, Africans find it very difficult on their arrival in the UK to adjust to life in Britain. The differences in their worldviews make cross-cultural communication difficult. In addition, it is often a great shock to the African immigrant Christian that most nations that brought the gospel to Africa no longer hold on to its Christian values. For instance, secularisation has overcome religion in many European countries that were once very Christian in culture. The Christian nation they perceived Britain to be is not what they find when they land.

Government Policy on Migration

Many African Christians have migrated to the West for better living conditions, and as they migrate, they “bring their faith along.”¹⁶ For instance, members of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana who migrated to the UK for political asylum, higher education, or professional enhancement in the 1980s, brought their Christianity along with them. They later invited the leadership

11 Branson and Martinez, *Churches*, 79.

12 Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man* (New York: Whittlesey, 1949), 23.

13 Emmanuel Yartekwei Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Peterborough England: Epworth, 2006), 8.

14 Andy Hardy and Dan Yarnell, *Forming Multicultural Partnership: Church Planting in a Divided Society* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2015), 82.

15 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 164.

16 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 12.

in Ghana to plant churches in the communities in which they settled. That is how the CoP started in Britain. Because of this, African Christianity is no longer just an African phenomenon today. It is a global phenomenon as it has spread to all the continents in the world.¹⁷ This has helped curb the rapid decline of Christianity in the West. Timothy Tennent observes that, “Immigration represents the most important hope not only for the on-going viability of our society but also for the reevangelization of the West.”¹⁸ In 2014, Peter Brierley’s research concluded that African Christians have helped stem the decline in congregation numbers in UK.¹⁹ In the report, Brierley points out that the emergence of a large number of black immigrant churches has helped to curb the decline in British Christianity. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Africans to migrate to the UK due to the tighter immigration laws that the UK government is implementing. Kwiyani mentions the possibility that some Africans in the immigrant churches are living in the UK as illegal immigrants because they have overstayed their legal status.²⁰ Random police checks, deportations and the rising anti-immigrant sentiments make life difficult even for immigrant Africans living in the UK legally. There was a major outcry in July 2013 when Home Office vans drove through racially diverse boroughs in London, displaying a picture of handcuffs with the message: “In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest.” Since 2002, immigration has been one of the top five political issues in every election campaign.²¹ This has become a major challenge for many African immigrant churches whose members do not have legal residency permits in the UK.

Racial and Cultural Prejudice and Discrimination

The subject of race is usually the ‘elephant in the room’ in intercultural conversation within the church. It is a delicate subject that does not need to be delicate at all; the more we can talk openly about it, the better for all involved in mission in Britain. Racial prejudice and discrimination exist in the church just as much as in the secular world. Most African immigrant churches are unable to reach out to the indigenes in the UK. Kwiyani observes that usually, “You have to be of the right colour, subscribe to the right

17 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 25.

18 Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 44.

19 Ruth Gledhill, Church Attendance has been propped up by immigrants, says study <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/03/church-attendance-propped-immigrants-study> (3rd June 2014) Between 2005 and 2012, 400 out of the 700 mostly Pentecostal new churches which began in London were black majority churches (BMCs).

20 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 183–184.

21 Farouk Chothia, “How Welcome Are Africans in the UK?” BBC, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-25111177> (accessed 17/07/2015).

theology, wear the right clothes, speak with the right accent, have graduated from the right school and know the right people before you can be considered for inclusion.”²² Unfortunately, a typical black African Christian working in Britain can never qualify. To many Westerners, nothing good can come out of Africa. Many still believe that Africa has nothing good to offer the world. The African Christian in Britain is therefore seen as inferior, greeted with suspicion, and perceived as a potential criminal, refugee, or a beggar, even before the word “Hello” is said. Discrimination is the African immigrant minister’s daily bread.²³ Talking about African priests in the Roman Catholic church, Dean Hoge and Aniedi Okure suggest that, “Even after naturalisation or incardination, non-Western ministers of darker skins are regarded as strange, ‘international’ and ‘foreign’ by the mainline churches.”²⁴ This situation has led to many African ministers and members leaving the mainline churches to either form their own churches or join other African churches. When Kugbeadjor was in ministerial training in Birmingham he visited a local congregation of the Church of England in Birmingham with a colleague. After the service, they told the priest how glad they were to be part of the service, stating that they would visit again. However, the priest who was nice to them still mentioned – probably with good intentions – that they could go to a Pentecostal church down the street if they did not feel comfortable. This made them feel unaccepted and unwelcomed, and of course, they never visited again.

Adapting to the Challenges

It is rather easy for African immigrant churches to freeze in the face of these and other challenges they face. For instance, to insulate themselves from the cross-cultural challenges, most African churches first reached out to their diasporic community on their arrival in the UK. The hope was that they would attempt to reach others later. In the case of the CoP, the current International Chairman, Opoku Onyinah, points out that by first reaching out to the Ghanaian diasporic community, the Church of Pentecost intends to use its congregation as “a springboard to contribute to the Christianisation of the world through evangelism.”²⁵ However, like all other African immigrant churches, the challenge to do cross-cultural mission to reach the British remains too difficult, even for the CoP after existing in Britain for 26 years. Kwiyani observes that the longer an immigrant congregation exists, the more ‘foreign’ it becomes. It is therefore not a surprise that African churches in

22 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 175.

23 Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 175–176.

24 Dean R. Hoge and Aniedi Okure, *International Priests in America: Challenges and Opportunities* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006), 135.

25 Onyinah Opoku, “Pentecostalism and the African Diaspora: An Examination of the Missions Activities of the Church of Pentecost,” *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 218.

the UK are filled predominantly with Africans from the countries where these churches originated.

Most African immigrant churches conduct their services in English. Jehu Hanciles points out that this “removes a major barrier to cross-cultural ministry or missionary engagement.”²⁶ However, the services are conducted in ‘African-English’ where English is spoken but filled with African nuances, partly because most of the leaders have not taken time to learn how to effectively communicate cross-culturally. Many of these churches have over-emphasised their home culture in the expression of the Christian faith instead of adapting to their new environment. A lack of understanding of the dynamics of the indigenes’ cultures by immigrant churches has meant that they have become irrelevant and will remain ‘aliens’ in their host communities for a long time.

To overcome these challenges, African immigrant churches must adapt their ministries in the UK in order to be contextually relevant. Although the achievements of the African immigrant churches should be applauded, they cannot reach out to their neighbours in their host communities if the gospel is not properly contextualised in their new environment. Just as “a fully-fledged denominational church with all its associated Western-style liturgies, symbolic system, and worldview in the middle of Africa is a distortion of the incarnational principle of mission,”²⁷ so is the reverse in the West. African immigrant churches must be missional-incarnational churches open to innovation, experimentation, and creativity. A missional church “is careful not to abandon the truth of the gospel nor water down its implications.” This process is called *critical contextualisation*.²⁸

The emphasis of African immigrant churches should be on cultural adaptation, but without losing their focus on the eternal goal of conforming to the image of Christ. Contextualisation stresses the importance of “formulating, presenting and practising the Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualisation, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency.”²⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch highlight that “the seemingly steadfast refusal or resistance by the church to seriously contextualise the gospel is one of its greatest mistakes and will sadly hasten its declining influence on Western society.”³⁰ African immigrant churches must first examine their host cultures they are trying to reach and contextualise their mission to engage it.

26 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 366.

27 Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 57.

28 Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping*, 106.

29 Enoch Wan in Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 347.

30 Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping*, 107.

There is also a need for African church leaders and their colleagues in the West to work closely together in cross-cultural partnerships. This will enable them to recognise the cultural differences that make it difficult to understand each other's perspective.³¹ Tom Jones observes that, "As culture rapidly changes, the wineskins of yesterday become brittle and unable to hold the new wine of the gospel. We must learn to communicate the gospel in accurate and culturally relevant ways. The methods of the '50s were not sufficient for the '90s, nor are the models that communicated to modernity sufficient for a postmodern context."³²

In addition, the changing immigration laws in Britain mean that African immigrant churches in the UK will have to find new ways of doing church. The time of "growth-by-migration" have gone. For their churches to continue to exist and grow, African immigrant Christians must connect with the British to effectively share the gospel with them. They have to evangelise the locals. To do this, African churches will have to adapt their messages, worship and preaching styles, mission and evangelism strategies in order to be relevant to Britain. They must find new ways of training up indigenous British leaders to work alongside their African leaders.³³ When planting new churches, they must learn to plant 'local species' in order to produce indigenous churches in the UK. This will enable them to overcome the immigration challenge and avoid extinction.

Samuel Escobar observes that, "On almost every continent, migration movements have brought to cities, and industrial or commercial centres, legions of mission minded lay people from Third World churches."³⁴ This is an opportunity for partnership in mission. Hardy and Yarnell suggest that the sharp decline in Christianity in the West indicates that the indigenous churches cannot help their own churches thrive.³⁵ They will need the assistance of the vibrant African immigrant churches, and many other non-Western churches found in Britain today.

In order to overcome the challenge of discrimination, Western Christian leaders must accept that mission is God's invitation to all Christians everywhere to play a role in God's redemptive plan on earth; they must understand that all human beings are foreigners and exiles on earth (1 Peter 2:11). Many

31 Hardy and Yarnell, *Forming*, 82.

32 Tom Jones, "Why Plant Churches?" in *Church Planting from the Ground Up* ed. Tom Jones (Joplin, Mo: College Press Pub. Co., 2004), 98.

33 H. Richard Burgess, "African Pentecostals in Britain: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God," in *African Christian Presence in the West : New Immigrant Congregations and Transnational Networks in North America and Europe*, ed. Frieder Ludwig and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2011), 268.

34 Samuel Escobar, "Mission from Everywhere to Everyone: The Home Base in a New Century," in *Edinburgh 2010 : Mission Then and Now*, ed. David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross (Oxford: Regnum/Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 2009), 194.

35 Hardy and Yarnell, *Forming*, 82.

must humble themselves to accept that help is required from their non-Western Christian brothers and sisters to reach out to the unsaved. African church leaders and their Western colleagues need to start speaking boldly about discrimination in their churches. Of course, it will be difficult for many British Christians to accept Africans as missionaries in Britain just as the Africans accepted British missionaries in Africa long ago. However, this is the only way forward.

Conclusion

This essay has explored three significant adaptive challenges faced by African immigrant churches in their work in the UK. It has also suggested ways in which the churches can become missional and be effective in mission in Britain. The study identified culture, racial prejudice and discrimination, and government policy on migration as the three adaptive challenges that African churches need to wrestle with. To overcome these challenges and avoid extinction, African immigrant churches must revise their mission practices by adapting to their new environment. One could easily argue that the risk involved in breaking down the culture and discrimination barriers are enormous. However, a better understanding of God's mission in our world by both the indigenous people and the African immigrant churches will be helpful. The church must understand that its witnessing to the nations is the very means through which Christ Jesus will bring His light and salvation to the ends of the earth. The issue of discrimination in Western Christianity must be addressed by both the Western and African church leaders. This will enable healthy multicultural relationships and partnerships to be built for mission. The current culturally and ethnically diverse societies demand unity among Western and non-Western churches in mission to curb the rapid decline in Christianity in the West.

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