

*Developments and Trends in African Christianity:
An Anglican Kenyan Perspective*

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Introduction

A cursory look at African Christianity reveals at least two conspicuous phenomena. The first of these is the sustained exponential growth of Christianity within a relatively short period of time, with numbers growing from about 10 million in 1900 to just over half a billion in 2015. An equally noticeable phenomenon is the diversity of the different forms of Christian practices and teachings in Africa to the extent that it may be more accurate to see it as Christianities rather than Christianity.

In 2010, Christians in Africa were estimated to be about 518 million translating to about 63% of the continent's total population of about 823 million.¹ Based on present trends, it is estimated that Christian following in Africa will surpass a billion by 2050. Andrew Walls describes Christianity in Africa as "the standard Christianity of the present age" and that the sustained growth in and of itself is "a demonstration model of its character." (See Galgalo, *African Christianity*, 2012:53). Lamin Sanneh shares Walls' supposition and predicts that "African Christianity might be the shape of things to come."²

There is no denying that Africa Christianity is increasingly vibrant and as the populations of the countries keep growing, the churches proportionately take their fair share of this growth. The growth is not limited to any particular denomination and increase in numbers often results into variety of Churches. To cite the example of Kenya, during the 2009 national census, 31,877,734 (82.98%) out of the national population of 38,412,088 identified themselves as Christian (of Catholic, Protestant or other denominations). This translates to about 9 points percentage increase compared to the result of the 1999 census.

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/sub-saharan-africa/>

² *Historian Ahead of His Time, Christianity Today Magazine, February 2007*

We acknowledge this amazing development but also take note of one common criticism that this impressive quantitative growth is by no means always matched by an equally impressive qualitative growth (for example see, Kritzinger, J J (ed) 2002. *No Quick Fixes*. Pretoria: ISWEN / IMER). Elijah Kim, for example, observes that although “the center of gravity of the Christian faith has shifted from the West to non-West where the majority of the world’s Christians now live ... [this] quantitative changes do not necessarily mean that qualitative changes have occurred” (*The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom*, 2012). Although this, and such other criticisms about African Christianity are, in as far as they are specific, not without merit, it is also true to say that African Christianity is for most part a deep, spiritual and authentic expression of the holistic gospel that celebrates and affirms the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Besides the vibrant growth of African Christianity, its diversity is equally striking. From ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian Churches to the newest of the new denominations in sub-Saharan countries, Africa is the continent (perhaps) with the greatest number of Christian denominations in the world. The diversity of African Christianity makes it very difficult to speak of an ‘African Christianity.’ Multiple appropriations of the gospel and the varied forms of faith expressions that exist in Africa today, would perhaps justify the expression, ‘African Christianities’ as opposed to Christianity. Local and congregational varieties flourish and exist side by side even for Churches that share denominational affinities. As Kim observes, “churches in the majority world [typically] emphasize different aspects of the gospel and focus on particular doctrines resulting in multiple forms of Christianity.” (Elijah JF Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom*, 2012).

I will borrow from the Kenyan example once again to draw attention to the enormity of the existing internal diversities. During the 2009 national census, there was a total of about 8200 legally registered denominations and thousands more lining up to be registered. A total of 4.5 million out of the 31.8 million Christians did not want to be identified with either Catholics or any of the Protestant denominations. They were happy to be referred to as Pentecostal or a member of some of the many African Instituted Churches. The proliferation of Churches creates interdenominational competition but also a multiplier effect and a multipronged effort in evangelism. All churches are busy at work and as Paul says

in Philippians 2:18, “The important thing is that in every way ... Christ is preached.”

The denominational differences, although for most part not necessarily contradictory, do in the broad sweep of things encompass heretical sects whose teachings and practices call for a careful discernment of where the boundaries of acceptable diversity should be drawn.

Example of Jehovah Wanyonyi of ‘Lost Israelites Church’ was a self-proclaimed god and believed Mount Elgon to be the Biblical Zion; and such other ‘sects.’ [YouTube]

Note that Wanyonyi’s church or such other sects, although part and parcel of the African Christian landscape, are marginal and are by no means representative of the Kenyan or African Christianity.

It is not easy to make a precise historical analysis of all the developments and trends in African Christianity because of the historical, contextual and not least the diversities arising from varied expressions of faith. We shall adopt a general approach and deliberately limit our focus to generalized themes of emergent issues since the 1990s. Even where Africa is used in the general sense, examples from my own Kenyan context is in mind. My paper is a general impressionistic sketch and draws largely on anecdotal experience. Two scholarly works, however, have been very helpful in the preparation of this presentation: Paul Gifford’s article, ‘Some Recent Developments in African Christianity,’ in *African Affairs* [Vol.93, No. 373 (Oct., 1994), pp. 513-534] and Adriaan van Klinken’s chapter, ‘African Christianity – Developments and Trends,’ in Stephen Hunt (ed.), *Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Themes and Developments in Culture, Politics, and Society* (Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion Series, Vol. 10), Leiden: Brill, 129-151). To both these authors, I am gratefully indebted.

With those introductory comments, let us now consider our subject under seven brief sections: diversity and vibrancy; priority of prayer; Pentecostalism; theological trends; worship and preaching; social value of the Church; and nominal Christianity.

1. Diversity and Vibrancy

The enormous diversity and vibrancy of African Christianity comes with a great sense of ecclesial democracy and theological space. Members are able to exercise their gifts and enjoy full participation in their churches. It also means that a congregation can influence the mode of worship, ministry priorities, mission strategies, and sometimes to a great degree, the kind of church leadership they would want and how authority in their church should be exercised. Of course, all things are possible only in as far as any conflict of interest and set programs may permit. One drawback of the proliferation of denominations coupled with great ecclesial democracy is a resultant fluidity of church membership and weak denominational allegiance among church members.

The competing denominations create endless choices for worshippers, and the churches in the circumstances tend to operate with a sort of ‘Restaurant mentality’ serving to members and ‘church-shoppers’ (so to speak) whatever sells best. As a result we have an emerging trend where denominational loyalty is driven by varied motivations including interest in one or another form of liturgical worship, doctrinal persuasions, search for healing or deliverance, the need for a spiritual home, social affiliations, convenience (such as proximity, etc), social programs, personal devotion to particular charismatic leader, or ‘prophetic’ preacher, and not least entertainment – in the form of ‘lively’ worship where a worshipper finds enjoyment, an experience commonly described as a ‘spiritual blessing’ as the Spirit is believed to come down in such worship.

Interesting to note is that most members of an established mainline denomination such as Catholic, Anglicans, Presbyterians or Methodists who join worship of another denomination do not usually see their choice to worship with a different denomination a problem and generally do not consider themselves as having changed their denominational identity or allegiance. I know of hundreds of Anglicans who for years have consistently worshipped at one or the other of the many leading Pentecostal Churches in Nairobi and would always insist that they are Anglicans because they were baptized into the Anglican Church, they probably married in an Anglican Church and most would prefer their internment, when the day comes, to be conducted by an Anglican minister. This confusing state of affairs means that most Africa Christians hold denominational affiliations as an important part of their social identity, but not necessarily a ‘spiritual home’ or constitutive of their most important spiritual experience. I usually compare this to persons who live in a foreign country for all their life, but who may never consider relinquishing the citizenship of their country of birth.

2. Priority of Prayer

The African Church is a praying Church. A huge part of being Church is lived out through a rather demonstrable life of corporate prayer. Whereas this is expected and prayer should be integral to the life of the Church, there is a hyped or ‘glorified’ sense of public display of prayer that is perhaps unique to African Christianity. Different denominations seem to outdo each in organizing or running Church prayer groups, overnight prayers popularly known as *keshas*, prayer rallies, prayer retreats, national day of prayer, schools day of prayer (particularly for candidates preparing for national examinations) and many other structured prayer programs and even prayer courses such as one called *ombi* run by most mainline Kenyan Churches.

Most denominations also hold thanksgiving services at the request of individual or family members who would hold a prayer event for varied reasons such as when opening a new house, a new business, on securing a new job or a promotion, recovery from a serious illness or even such mundane things as relocating to another country or moving house. The culture of prayer is so inculcated in African Christians that no undertaking – whether major or minor, happens without prayer. Any meetings, for example, whether formal or informal including fellowship gatherings, visits to each others’ homes, actual events or its planning such as funeral, wedding, fundraising, consultations, formal committees, even official state functions such as the opening of parliament, ceremonies and political rallies, etc. will always, without exception, begin with an opening prayer and ends with a closing prayer. Matters of concerns raised during the meeting may be prayed for by one or more persons before the closing prayer is offered. It is very unlikely that any Christian would eat any meal or have a drink before saying grace, whether they are in a hospital bed, on a bus, at a public event, in a restaurant or in the privacy of their home.

What is the importance of this trend? The practice of prayer does not only characterize African Christianity but also affords great impetus to the mission of the Church. The church in Kenya, for example, has cut for itself a public space where Christian spirituality is offered to the wider society through prayer. There is great opportunity here for the Church’s presence and witness for as long as the church can maintain her place at public gatherings and responsively offer prayers at state functions and public events. Claiming public space through presence and prayer is perhaps African Christianity’s greatest boon in the 21st century.

It is also notable that this public face of Christianity is not just an opportunity for the church's point of contact with the wider society but also affirms the church's existence beyond the formal structures of being church. The society becomes the church's public religious space created through public practice of prayer, which in turn provides an evangelistic opportunity, a benefit to the mission of the church.

Through the church's effective occupation of this public spiritual space, another important impact is beginning to be felt. This is the church's influence of the general society's use of religious language in a distinctively African Christian way. Christian songs and hymns are particularly inspirational for political speeches and provide effective points of contact with a range of audiences. A typical Christian greeting, 'praise the Lord,' and 'God bless you,' used as parting words and other phrases as 'God be with you,' or 'sincerely in Christ' are no longer the exclusive preserve for use by Christians only but a common everyday greeting or way of relating. Of particular significance is that the pervasive nature of religion and affectionate display of spirituality have proved effective in lay involvement in evangelism. People are happy to talk about God, because it is a normal way to be. Ordinary Christians often take their role and call to witness for Christ very seriously. They can, and most take every opportunity to pray for strangers or friends alike and more importantly invite them to their churches. I have often been stopped in the street by strangers who want to offer me a prayer or share testimonies of their faith in Jesus Christ.

3. Influence of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement

Another notable development of African Christianity is the emerging great mix of traditions that is becoming increasingly typical of every church. The rise and influence of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement cannot be overstated. The established churches such as Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and such other missionary founded churches are continuously finding creative ways of containing loss of members to the newer churches. The phenomenal growth of both indigenous and imported Pentecostalism has remarkably impacted older denominations and noticeably influenced charismatic renewal movements. This trend has particularly caused the mainline churches to rethink the form and their practice of formal liturgical worship. Examples of structured or informal responses from the mainline churches are plentiful.

Pentecostalization of church worship, if not theology, has become a mission imperative for African Christianity. There is something African about the easy flow of the Pentecostal worship, spirituality and its emphases on the healing and empowering gift and power of the Spirit. A problem for the African Church is that young people would prefer more informal worship services with loud modern music, a packaging of spiritual uplifting by way of a stimulating entertainment, and charismatic preaching by flamboyant and stylish preachers of the Pentecostal Churches. In response, most non-Pentecostal congregations would now hold a number of services on any given Sunday to suit different interests and groups. Services are increasingly becoming more informal and ‘tailor-made’ to provide choices that meet the taste of various segments of the congregation. My own national Cathedral in Nairobi creatively offers more than ten different services on any given Sunday, which ranges from high liturgical worship (matins, evensong, regular family services) to very informal happy-clappy youth services.

The creative adjustments aside, one observation is pertinent. As a result of the mainline churches’ response to Pentecostalism, and for most part the ‘domesticating’ of charismatic renewal within the churches, we see an increasing loss of liturgical traditions. The example of my own Anglican church is in mind. Formal liturgical worship is quickly losing ground. Liturgies are used sparingly, or only occasionally, or not at all for most services. For most congregations, written liturgies are used only during the Holy Communion services, which often are few and far in between (monthly – at most), or during such rites as baptism, wedding or funerals. Even where written liturgies are used in such churches, most parts would be skipped and only select sections are used. As a result, such important aspects of the liturgy as the reciting, chanting or singing of the Psalter are now lost to us, often replaced by sessions called ‘praise and worship’ – a lengthy time of singing followed by extempore prayers.

The demise of liturgical traditions, so to speak, is not something the Church seems to mourn. Most congregations often prefer opportunity for spontaneous prayers. In response to this need, prayers are typically extempore and spontaneous. There is a strong belief that prayers must be prayed from the heart as the spirit leads. Written prayers or litanies are generally seen as being ‘read’ and whereas it may have a place in the life of the Church it should never be a substitute for specific petitions, requests and thanksgiving that need to be presented to God in very specific terms. For sure, liturgical prayers or litanies are always welcome as opportunities for ‘participating’ in prayers of the church but never a substitute or an alternative to personal prayer. The loss of the written liturgical tradition has been long coming

and the Church seems to be just happy to live through this development without any formal intervention except for the Roman Catholic Church with impressive approach to liturgical enculturation and guided Africanization of Christianity.

It is worth mentioning that, while written liturgies are increasingly losing ground, there is growing tendency to use clerical vestments and bright liturgical colours with keen attention to the liturgical calendar. Also, although the exercise of discipline and administration of sacraments are not considered as weighty, issues of ecclesial authority are never a light matter. At least among the Anglican Churches, and surprisingly also for some Pentecostal Churches, episcopacy is seen as the focal point of any church. This again is another point of cross-fertilization. Where the liturgy book has been shelved, due to the Pentecostals, Pentecostal preachers have been vested, thanks to the Anglicans. It must also be credited to the Anglicans that Pentecostals, otherwise generally congregational, congregates around the Bishop and submits to Episcopal authority.

4. Theological Trends

Current theological trends in African Christianity are rather complicated to summarize here because of our limited scope. Theological discourses and emergent methods over the last 50 years have largely remained exploratory. It cannot be denied, however, that contributions by African theologians of post-colonial Africa have laid strong foundations for directions in African Theology. Ways of doing theology have always been in response to the key frame of reference of how best Africa may receive and appropriate the gospel of Jesus Christ. Dominant proposals span adaptation, indigenization, enculturation or contextualization, liberation, Black theology, reconstruction and more recently the post-colonial readings of Scripture. Just to mention a few key proponents, and in no any particular order, we have: John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, John Pobee, Kofi Appiah-Kubi, Jesse Mugambi, Villa Vicencio, Musa Dube, Gerald West, Charles Nyamiti, Benezet Bujo, Teresa Okure, Mercy Oduyoye, Bolaji Idowu, Tinyiko Maluleke, Kwesi Dickson, Emmanuel Martey , among other distinguished men and women theologians from the continent. Pressing contextual issues including Biblical hermeneutics, theological methods, African spirituality and social concerns such as interfaith dialogue, HIV/AIDS, social justice, poverty, political governance and theological education have continued to determine and shape themes in African theology.

While this is all good and a great deal of theological work and contribution is in no short supply, there is, at the same time, disturbing disconnects between the African Church and the trained theologians. We are increasingly seeing emergence of ‘Churches without trained theologians and theologians without Churches.’ This is true for most Church denominations except perhaps the Roman Catholics.

Most mainline churches no longer invest in theological education and ordinands pay for their ministerial training. This is true for some Anglican dioceses in Kenya. In the circumstances most clergy hold little or no particular loyalty to the diocese, even though they would take vows of canonical obedience at ordination. A culture of employee-employer mentality is evident and ministers may move from diocese to diocese or join other institutions where remuneration or terms of service are better. It is also common that ordinands often choose to study in institutions of their choice. With this regard, affordability rather than confessional or denominational consideration often inform such choices. Increasingly we see a trend where ordinands who end up as ministers in mainline Churches receive their training in Pentecostal Colleges. Such ministers with very little or no knowledge of their mother denomination’s theology, spirituality, tradition or liturgy are often the key ‘Pentecostalizing’ agents in the mainline churches. Due to such a mix, we do have a happy cross fertilization of traditions. Practices, for example, like anointing with holy water or oil for blessing or healing services, once thought to be a preserve of the Pentecostal Churches, are now common in many Churches, including Anglican and Presbyterian.

Also, there are occasional cases where highly trained theologians hardly get the opportunity to serve in the Church because the church leadership (generally speaking) sees learned theologians as either subversive to established authority or theologically unfit or unaffordable. Ironically, whereas learned theologians may be edged out of the mainstream of church leadership, there is a widespread popular movement among the general church membership, which through formal Bible reading programs such as ‘Bible Study Fellowship’ or informal groupings such as Church cell groups or neighborhood Bible Study groups (which often are interdenominational). There are also Church run programs such as Theological Education by Extension, which have continued to promote the emergence of a ‘theologically’, or at least, biblically informed, laity. Thanks to this development but also because of the prominent place of Christian Religious Education in schools, Bible knowledge is pervasive.

We must be quick to add that, although Bible knowledge may be commonplace in Africa, such knowledge does not necessarily, or always, influence every moral or ethical choice, or always inform all aspects of life. Of interest to note is that, daily life is generally contextualized by references to the Bible. Depending on the context, you may occasionally come across arguments based on a given Bible reference, and although often completely taken out of context, appropriated, and sometimes intentionally misapplied, to make a point. For example, it is not unexpected to hear one who arrives late at a function jokingly telling others in the words of Jesus that, “those who are hired in the morning and those in the evening are all entitled to equal pay.” Often you may find such usage quite overstretched and applied in jest to such serious cases as, for example, of a thief who falls victim to mob justice lightly dismissed with the words, ‘the wages of sin is death’ or “you reap what you sow” or “an eye for an eye” or “let the dead bury the dead” – applied in such context to mean that, ‘the spiritually dead can stone and bury each other.’

5. Popular Worship and Preaching

A simple folk or popular Christianity is also gaining ground in Kenya. With this development we see very little emphases on the teaching or preaching of doctrines. Preaching in most churches is usually given a prominent place and generously allowed anything from 30 to 90 minutes. One typical trend with preaching in Kenya, and almost without exception, is that the preachers paraphrase the Bible narrative, and followed by a simple application, encourage the listener to obey the word as it is written. More common practice is that of using a Bible verse, phrase or passage as a proof text to make a point. One trend observed with sermons, in almost all our denominations is where most sermons commonly are presented as motivational talks or are about such popular topics as life skills, family life, relationships, leadership, giving, empowerment, marriage enrichment, purpose driven life, and so on. To give credit where it is due, parishes would normally conduct retreats and teach theological topics of interest as prayer, the Spirit and the ‘strongholds’ and spiritual maturity. Very rarely do we see solid exegesis of a biblical passage, or preaching of a doctrinal topic, from the pulpit. To draw on my own personal experiences, it is a long time since I last heard sermons on the cross, matters of personal sin, the need for repentance, the realities of heaven and hell, final judgment, even though individuals ‘who have testimonies’ (to use a typical Kenyan phrase) would always tell how God has forgiven their sins and that they are saved and rejoice in the daily carrying of the cross of Jesus.

For most churches, matters of doctrine are taken for granted. Whereas the majority of the Pentecostal Churches feed their flock on a carefully chosen theological diet, such as prosperity gospel, personal holiness, spiritual warfare, healing and discipleship, most mainline churches simply affirm what the church believes by reciting the creeds. The lack of doctrinal emphases and structured teaching brings us to another unwelcome development. We observe that confusions are beginning to emerge in many areas of Church life, although these are largely ignored. For example ecclesiology, for the Anglicans in Kenya, is an area of great muddle. Lay presidency, for example, where deacons preside over Holy Communion is a common practice because the question of who rightly should preside at Holy Communion has quietly slipped us. As a result, most Anglican dioceses would recognize Presbyterian, Methodists or non-conformists ordinations; and lay presidency, where deacons preside, are common in most dioceses. Church discipline is another area of great confusion where the question of who should rightfully receive Holy Communion (members of other churches, single mothers, unwed couples, etc) is hardly given a thought. The fact that members under discipline may always walk to the next church down the road and find acceptance elsewhere has also not helped the matter.

6. Social Value and Mission of the Church

This brings us to one crucial observation. The diminished theological and doctrinal emphases is perhaps not seen as much of a loss because in Africa, certainly this is the case in my Kenyan experience, the church is primarily a sociological reality much more than anything else. The church for many is a way to be, and for an African to be is to be in relation with others (cp. Mbiti – ‘I am because you are’). In a practical sense the church is not just a ‘community of believers’, or ‘the *Body*,’ that is, an organism in some theological sense, but an actual ‘*somebody*’ as in a ‘person’ who provides a point of social reference. Individuals draw socio-psychological support from being in relation with one another through the church but also the church community provides real support in times of need. Examples of this are weddings, funerals, and fund raising events called *Harambees*, which help offset medical bills, and pay education expenses, etc.

We shall, in the interest of time, make only a cursory treatment of the present trends in mission. A major development is the emergent understanding of mission as integral and in this sense encompassing a broad sweep of definitions including ‘mission as entrepreneurship. Most Churches would have a clear vision and mission statement and a five year strategic plan in which primary evangelism and

church planting is given a top priority. Although nowhere written, the best mission strategy, so it seems, is for the churches to attain financial sufficiency to be able to support various aspects of ministry and mission work. This has encouraged an entrepreneurial spirit where particularly the urban churches are keen on what is popularly called IGAs (Income Generating Activities) – Schools, computer colleges, conferencing and hospitality services are among the most common of such IGA businesses.

Note that provision of schools, hospitals, vocational or community centres were in the past established and run by the churches and provided the main point of contact with various communities and were seen as valuable avenues for mission and outreach, indisputably a valuable key for church growth. These were services offered by the church and understood as the churches' mission mandate and opportunity for contribution to the public good. The only intended dividend or benefit to the church was the advantage that such services would provide opportunities for evangelism. The churches have of course always benefitted from the increase in church membership as a result of their influence through the schools or hospitals or such other services to the general public. The change from using these institutions exclusively as avenues for evangelism into enterprises is a good thing for the Church. Evangelism is even enhanced because income from the enterprise can fund the mission of the church as well as strengthen works of charity.

7. Nominal Christianity

Nominal Christianity is another major issue in the African Church today. Although Sunday services attract Christians in their thousands and churches are always full, there are increasing numbers of Christians who hardly attend church. In a survey by ACM-FTT Afriserve in 2004, it is reported that: “while Protestantism nominally accounts for 65% of Kenyan Christians, only 7% of the population attends a Protestant or evangelical church on a typical Sunday.”³ The report also observes that, the majority of Kenya's 24 year olds and below is largely un-churched, although they would have received baptism in their infancy. Nominal Christianity, I would argue, is the main reason for practices of syncretism among African Christians. African traditional beliefs like witchcraft, magic and sorcery

³ <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9537/godless-young-generation-worries-kenyan-churches>

and blood sacrifices are, for example, common among members who identify themselves as Christians but are only nominal and are happy to be part of the social Christianity without giving any meaningful allegiance to its doctrinal tenets. Polygamy also persists because such Christians are not bothered to obey all or even any part of church teaching. There is a great liberal sense among uncommitted Christians that, 'whatever serves man best, religion included, must be exploited.' Nominal Christians are problematic for the Church because, as this category of Christians grows, the church has to contend with syncretism. Traditional religionists often have no qualms about carrying the Bible in one hand and their traditional beliefs and practices in the other. Our history of Christianity at some point closely associated 'being Christian' with reputable social status and class. This continues to influence the mentality that, after all, one could belong to a church for reasons of social standing but without serious commitment. Today we have many who would proudly identify themselves as Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics or any of such other established denominations, but may not tell the last time they were in a Church, and may not find any reason to go to Church, except when it may be socially beneficial to do so.

Conclusion

I draw to a conclusion this impressionistic sketch. Many more things could be said especially on African Christianity's general impact on society in areas of politics and governance, social and economic progress, matters of social justice, tribalism, poverty and of the Church's inter-denominational and intra-denomination relations, and especially of the Church's role in interfaith relations and mission priority areas such as HIV and AIDS and theological education. Changing times and context also influence the direction and priorities of the Church's mission. We rejoice that the future directions and impact of the Church are open to God's great possibilities.