

MISSION IN THE DIASPORA: THE ROLE OF MIGRANTS (REFUGEES) AS PRINCIPAL BEARERS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

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Abstract

This paper explores migration and displacement as both a crisis and opportunity. It maintains that throughout biblical history—and even in the history of modern mission—migrants and refugees have often become the principal bearers of the Christian faith. In our own generation, Africans who have migrated to other parts of the world for various reasons have traveled with their faith. Many African churches such as Kingsway International Christian Centre, The Church of Pentecost, Winners Chapel International, International Central Gospel Church, and Victory Bible Church International have all established branches of their churches in the diaspora through the efforts of their members who have migrated abroad. These Christians often come together in house fellowships, which metamorphose into churches and then pastors from their home countries are sent to lead them. This situation, I have argued, accounts for the significant expansion of the African churches in the diaspora.

Introduction

Human migration is part of human history. It is the movement of people from one place to another with the view to settle either temporarily or permanently. A refugee is a person who moves from his or her home or original settlement to another as a result of either natural disaster or civil disturbance, while one affected by the same factors and moved within the same country may be described as a displaced person. Thus, all refugees are migrants but not all migrants are refugees.

In certain parts of the world, the migrants or displaced refugees do not feel welcomed by the host nation. As a result, the churches become their home and family away from home. These diaspora churches provide not only spiritual strength for their members but also emotional, financial, and social support, including resolving family and immigration issues. Thus, the churches enable migrants and refugees to survive in sometimes lonely and difficult situations. At the same time, the churches provide migrants and refugees with the platform from which they can launch their evangelistic activities in their respective communities.

Part of the substance of this paper appeared in my essay, “Mission, Migration and World Christianity: An Evaluation of the Mission Strategy of the Church of Pentecost in the Diaspora,” published in the *Pentecost Journal of Theology and Mission* in 2016. In that paper, I argued that African indigenous churches such as the Church of Pentecost play a significant role in the whole process of reverse mission. And this is made possible principally through the efforts of its members living abroad who start fellowships with their own fellow migrants, and these soon become churches. Here, I take the argument further to say that although many of these migrants, some of whom may be refugees or asylum seekers, do not see themselves as missionaries, they initiate the process of evangelism and church planting, and become key figures in reverse mission.

The Next Christendom

In 1970, researcher David Barrett boldly predicted that the number of Christians in Africa would reach 350 million by the year 2000. This was from a mere 10 million in 1910.¹ In 2001, Barrett published the second

edition of his seminal *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, and he estimated the actual Christian population to be 360 million, which was more than he predicted. His classic reference book further illuminated the changing demography of modern Christianity and the massive shift of the faith's center of gravity from the West to the southern continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²

In that same time period, around the dawn of the new millennium, Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako were drawing our attention to the fact that not only was Africa practicing the faith, it was changing it as well. Christianity was becoming a non-Western religion.³ This assertion was reaffirmed when Philip Jenkins, in his weighty book, *The Next Christendom*, argued that Africa, alongside Asia and Latin America, would define the coming of a new global Christianity by the year 2050. Jenkins observed that the stupendous growth of the church in Africa was principally in the Pentecostal/Charismatic strand of Christianity and that these churches were far more traditional, morally conservative, evangelical, and apocalyptic than their northern counterparts.⁴ David Barrett and Harvey Cox had previously drawn the same conclusions.⁵

What remains to be researched is the diffusion of such Christianity from Africa to the global religious space. It has been observed that Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora offers new resources for the interpretation and analysis of African Christian movements.⁶ Jehu Hanciles has documented some developments in North America,⁷ and here I turn my attention to how this process begins from Africa. I look especially at the Church of Pentecost.

Migrants and Christian Mission

History has revealed that migration and Christian mission have often gone hand in hand. This can be seen in the early Church as persecuted Jewish Christians in Jerusalem fled to the neighboring communities of Samaria and later to Asia Minor in search of peace and security. In the process, these persecuted Christians moved not only with their families and possessions but also with their faith and culture. Thus Walls maintains:

It is easy enough to point to historical situations where migration forwarded the spread of the faith. It is clear that the earliest spread of the faith beyond Jewish Palestine owed much to prior Jewish migration across the Mediterranean world, as well as into Mesopotamia and beyond. The Jewish communities in the diaspora provided the networks by which the message about Jesus spread.⁸

Refugees such as Philip and others evangelized in the region of Judea and Samaria, and many came to faith in Christ (Acts 8). Hundreds of years later, the Puritans of the early seventeenth century fled England to North America so that they could live and practice their faith in the peace and security of the new nation.

However, persecution and migration do not always signal a certain advance of the faith. In this regard, Andrew Walls rightly observes that migration stands for both disaster and promise, and it is not always clear whether it favors or hinders Christian mission.⁹ Walls comes to this conclusion by looking at the history of migration and the spread of Christianity in first-century Palestine and the movement of the faith across Europe from the fourth century. Walls points to cases where migration crushed, overwhelmed, or expelled well-established Christian communities—such as the raiders of Scandinavia who invaded Britain and the Muslim Arabs who entered Europe. But it is also clear that the spread of Christianity across the world owes as much to migration, either voluntarily or by persecution, as it does to direct missionary efforts. It is in these experiences that one may better understand African Christian mission in the diaspora.¹⁰

Migration and Refugee Crisis in Africa

African independence from colonial rule brought much optimism, not only for sovereign power but also for economic emancipation. But this hope soon disappeared as many newly freed African nations plunged into civil wars and never-ending military coups. These calamities led to the displacement of people and families not only into neighboring African countries but also into Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. The singular goal of all these people on the move: a better life.

Like the early Christians in Jerusalem who fled with the Gospel, African migrants today also carry their faith, culture, and churches with them as they travel across the continents. Thus Hanciles observes that while in the past “unprecedented European migrations from Christianity’s old heartland provided the impetus for the European missionary movement, phenomenal migrations from Christianity’s new heartlands in Africa, Latin America, and Asia have galvanized a massive non-Western missionary movement.”¹¹ It is in this experience that one may analyze “reverse mission” and the African contribution to global Christian mission.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016,” indicated that nearly sixty-six million people have been displaced around the world as refugees. This is a record high.¹² Nearly one-fourth of the refugees are in Africa. Conflicts in South Sudan, Sudan, Central African Republic, Somalia, and Nigeria have driven nearly fifteen million Africans from their homes.¹³

African refugees move in all directions. Some venture to neighboring African countries where economic and political life are deemed to be better. According to the UNCHR report, the African countries with the highest number of refugees include: Uganda (940,835), Ethiopia (791,681), Kenya (451,099), Chad (391,251), Cameroon (375,415), and South Sudan (262,560).¹⁴

Other refugees and migrants risk the treacherous routes to North Africa en route to Europe and Asia. In the process many lose their lives, while others are taken into forced labor by their captors. Many Ghanaian women who journeyed to Saudi Arabia in search of a better life have ended up as sex slaves and have suffered horribly. As refugees and illegal immigrants, such persons are vulnerable and barely have any access to judicial processes and human rights protection. In Ghana, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently issued a ban on the travel of Ghanaian women to Saudi Arabia in search of jobs.¹⁵

The Liberian civil war, which broke out in late 1989, led to an immediate influx of refugees to Ghana. The prayer camp at Gomoa Buduburam in the Central Region was converted into a refugee camp that became the first stop for asylum seekers from Liberia. By the close

of 1990, the Buduburam camp was home to about 7,000 refugees, while about 2,000 refugees pushed forward into the city of Accra, a journey of another forty kilometers. The churches in Greater Accra, Central, and Western regions played host to some of the refugees and provided them with material support. In turn, many of the refugees became active in the churches by joining the worship teams and other ministries. Other refugees established branches of their home churches at the refugee camp.

According to the Ministry of Interior in Ghana, a total of 21,088 refugees from sub-Saharan Africa were living in Ghana as of 2015. These included 11,262 Ivoirians; 5,262 Liberians; 3,212 Togolese; and 1,352 people from other countries.¹⁶

The refugee crisis in Africa cannot be overstated. Just recently, troops in northern Niger rescued nearly one hundred immigrants who, at the peril of their lives, were trying to cross the Sahara Desert, in the hope of reaching Europe through Libya. Many of these migrants were from Nigeria, Senegal, and Burkina Faso.¹⁷ One of them died shortly after he was rescued.¹⁸

Recent newspaper reports have revealed that the plight of many African refugees or asylum seekers in the United States of America is a matter of great concern to that country. In April 2017, the US Ambassador to Ghana, Robert Jackson, announced that there were more than 7,000 illegal Ghanaian migrants in the United States and that they would soon be deported. Sixty-three of such persons were recently sent back to Ghana—and they arrived with only a few of their possessions. Most of the sixty-three were football fans who travelled to Brazil to support Ghana at the 2014 World Cup football competition, and they later made their way to the United States and overstayed their visas.¹⁹

African Churches and Migrants in the Diaspora

African churches have been a source of hope and support to migrants and refugees in Europe and America, just as they have been for refugees in Ghana. One notable example is the Church of Pentecost, which was founded in 1962 by an Irish Missionary to Ghana, Rev. James McKeown. McKeown's history in Ghana stretches all the way back

to 1937, when he first arrived in the Gold Coast at the invitation of the Faith Tabernacle Church, led by Peter Anim.²⁰ By the time James McKeown retired from active service as a missionary-pastor and returned home to Northern Ireland in 1984, the Church of Pentecost was well established in Ghana with additional branches in Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Benin, Nigeria, and Liberia.

As of December 2015, the Church of Pentecost had more than two and a half million members (2,612,618) in Ghana and almost two hundred and fifty thousand members (243,534) in its ninety external branches across all the continents of the world.

The total membership of the Church of Pentecost in the United Kingdom as of December 2011 was 11,195. The figure increased to 14,203 in 2014, and 15,555 in 2015.²¹ Apart from the UK branches embarking on rigorous evangelism, the steady growth of the numbers is also attributed to the mass migration of Ghanaians from the Netherlands and Italy to Britain in the last seven or eight years after the European Union (EU) opened its borders. Many Ghanaian migrants in the Schengen states, who had received permanent residence in those countries, saw the move to the UK as an opportunity for their children to receive education in English, which would then ease their integration back to Ghana. However, this migration to the UK produced its own problems. For example, children who were born, raised, and enculturated in other European countries struggled to integrate into new communities in Britain. This brought a lot of tension between them and their parents, and a number of teenagers turned their backs on the church and their families, preferring to live their own independent lives.

Added to these challenges is the fact that many vulnerable migrants, no matter where they reside, are unable to return home to visit their spouses and children whom they left behind—and in some cases, have not seen for years. Returning home in the event of bereavement of a close family member is also often impossible. For most migrants, it is the church that provides the needed emotional support, as members continue to pray for each other and trust God for divine favor as they seek to regularize their immigration status and bring their families to join them.

The Church of Pentecost in the Netherlands played a significant role in the 1990s in helping settle a number of Ghanaians and other Africans who had come to the country to seek a better life. Many young African women who arrived before them were in dire straits. They had come with no academic qualifications, specialized skills, or knowledge of the Dutch language. As a result, many of these women, who were there illegally, resorted to prostitution in order to survive. (Some were even brought in by cartels for that very purpose.) The Church of Pentecost in the Netherlands tried to stop this cycle. African migrants in France, Italy, Germany, and Spain often face the same circumstances. In such desperate situations, churches are the ones who provide the vulnerable migrants with the needed spiritual, moral, and financial support.

Conclusion

It has been established that many situations account for migration or forced displacement of people across the continent of Africa and beyond. The optimism that greeted many African states soon turned sour when the corrupt African ruling elite took undue advantage of the citizens. Economic hardships following prolonged civil wars and military coups led to the displacement of many people from their home countries to neighboring African countries while many more traveled abroad to Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Over the years, some Africans have succeeded in travelling on visa permits, while many others have entered various countries as refugees and asylum seekers. Some used the legal process and regularized their stay, but many have been forced underground. They are vulnerable to all sorts of abuse. Some work at low-paying jobs while others resort to prostitution and drug peddling in order to survive. The situation becomes more desperate when the law catches up with them, and they face deportation or imprisonment.

African-initiated churches in these countries are an abiding source of rescue, hope, strength, and support. Many migrants, particularly Christians, look for churches in which to fellowship, and immigrant churches offer them a taste of home and a source of strength. In these

churches, fellow members help migrants find legal support to regularize their stay. Where the need arises, members also provide financial support, particularly in the case of bereavement. Migrants often constitute the majority of members of the African-initiated churches in the diaspora, and their movements also determine the growth or decline of such congregations. The African diaspora churches are therefore not only a platform for reverse mission to the West but also serve as a community that provides a home and spiritual support for vulnerable migrants.

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Notes

- 1 David Barrett, "AD 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa," *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970), 39–54.
- 2 D. Barrett et al., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Recent research has indicated that there are about 631 million Christians in Africa, ahead of Latin America, which records about 601 million. This makes Africa the continent with the highest population of Christians in the world. Cf. Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018).
- 3 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).
- 4 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7–8.
- 5 Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995).
- 6 See Afe Adogame et al., eds., *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (London: Continuum, 2008); Martin Lindhardt, ed., *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
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20 For a good study of the history of the Church of Pentecost, see Christine Leonard, *A Giant in Ghana* (Chichester, West Sussex: New Wine Ministry, 1989).

21 The Church of Pentecost, "2011 Missions Report," presented to the 13th Session of the Extra-Ordinary Council Meeting, Sowutuom, Accra, Ghana, 16–18 May 2012; The Church of Pentecost International Mission Directorate, "Missions Report, January—December 2014," presented to the 41st Session of the General Council Meetings, Gomoa Fetteh, Ghana, 6–9 May 2015.

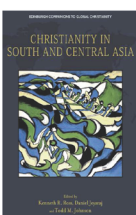
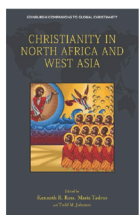
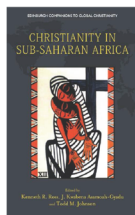


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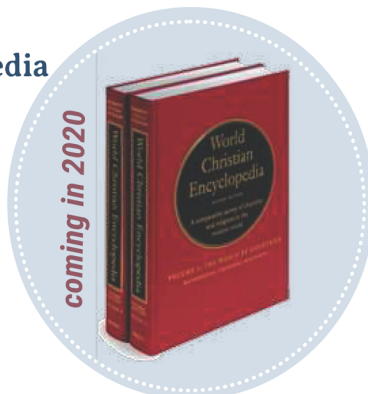
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