Evangelization and Church Growth: The Case of Africa

Norman E. Thomas

Phenomenal Growth

In 1970 David Barrett, the preeminent researcher of church trends in Africa, startled mission scholars by predicting that by the turn of the century in A.D. 2000 there would be 351 million Christians in Africa.¹

Twelve years later Barrett revised his estimate in his magnum opus, the World Christian Encyclopedia. After compiling voluminous data from a comprehensive country-by-country survey, he announced that his earlier prediction was in error. Instead of 351 million adherents to Christianity in A.D. 2000, he now predicted that there would be more than 393 million in the fifty-nine countries of Africa.²

Today we are in the midst of the second era of phenomenal growth of the Christian church in Africa. The first occurred during the early church. Barrett estimates that there were no practicing Christians on the African continent in A.D. 30. By A.D. 100, however, an estimated 2.3 percent of the continent’s population had become Christian, while 52.3 percent of the population had become aware of Christ and the gospel. Rapid growth continued in the next 200 years in the discipling of these persons. By A.D. 300, 32.6 percent were Christian, although the percentage “evangelized” (aware of Christ and the gospel) had increased to only 55.4 percent. The high-water mark of church membership occurred by A.D. 500 with 40 percent of Africa’s population adherents of Christianity, although only 45 percent of the continent’s growing population by then had heard of the gospel.

Then came the onslaught of Islam, with an accompanying slow but steady erosion both of Christian profession and of knowledge of Christ and the gospel. As recently as 1800, Barrett estimates, only 1.4 percent of Africa’s population were Christian, and only 5.7 percent were aware of Christ and the gospel. It had become the “dark continent” if by that term we mean walking without the light of Christ.³

The second period of Africa’s rapid church growth began in the late nineteenth century but accelerated only in the twentieth century. By 1900 Africa contained an estimated 9.9 million Christians (followers of Jesus Christ of all traditions, confessions, and degrees of commitment); these represented 9.2 percent of Africa’s total population of 107.9 million. By mid-1970 the number of Christians had exploded to 143 million (40.6 percent of Africa’s population of 351.8 million). Thereafter, Barrett predicts continued rapid growth in absolute numbers (236 million in 1985 and 393.3 million in 2000), though with only a slight gain in the percentage of Africa’s total population who are Christians (45.4 percent out of 520.4 million population in 1985; 48.4 percent out of 813.4 million population in 2000).⁴ Behind these macro-statistics are thousands of stories of faithful Christian witness by word and deed. One of them follows here.

The Hambukushu people had lived for 200 years in southeastern Angola close to the Zambian border. They had lived largely undisturbed, except when the Portuguese colonial rulers had forced the men to make roads. When guerrillas of a liberation movement entered their villages in 1967 in their fight against the Portuguese, 4,000 Hambukushu chose to flee the fighting. Hiding by day and traveling by night, they came safely to Botswana and resumed their life as skilled fishermen, hunters, blacksmiths, herdsmen, and dry-land agriculturalists.

No church had ever come near them in Angola. They came to Botswana unevangelized, illiterate, and still living their ancestral way of life. But their new story had a dynamic equivalent in the book of Exodus. They could be addressed prophetically:

Listen to me, you people of Etsha (their new home). Incline your ear and hear, you river people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Angola. When the foregoing of roads afflicted you, I heard your cry. I roused the guerrillas and sent them against your oppressors. When you fled from the war, I saved you from your pursuers. When you ran through the bush, I showed you where to find food. I delivered you out of all your troubles, and brought you to this place. I caused you to dwell here in safety and in peace. I caused you to prosper and have blessed you.⁵

The most perceptive recognized that they had come safely to Botswana like the Israelites to their Promised Land of old.

There followed a three-month mission by Botswana Christians, assisted by a few resident missionaries. Six times they visited each of the thirteen Hambukushu villages, presenting Christ for the first time to the people. They did it against the background of Old Testament stories already heard. During this time thousands of people in many lands prayed for this mission.

There was no well-thought-out plan, no evangelistic crusade manual. No one knew what to do in advance. What followed was for all participants the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. In one village in which religious services had been well attended, the invitation was met with a stony silence. Suddenly a young man stood up in front of the whole village and said, “I believe and I want to be baptized.” Five other young men took courage from him and were baptized, together with candidates from the next village. In another village, when challenged to accept Christ, the headman looked round and answered, “I am sure that we all believe and that we all want to be baptized.” The warmth of his people’s silent agreement spoke more than words. Within three months men, women, and children from ten villages had responded, been baptized together in the pools of the Okavango River, and formed ten new congregations.⁶

In the first period of African church growth, from A.D. 100-500, the percentage of Christians increased rapidly but the percentage of the population evangelized peaked and actually declined. Is this a measure of both the vitality and the predictability of patterns of religious change? I believe so.

Consider the statistics during 1970-85 for annual change of religious adherence to two major African religions—Christianity and Islam. In mid-1970 each could claim that 40 percent of Africa’s

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population were their adherents—about 142 million each. How­
ever, the statistics in the World Christian Encyclopedia show that Christianity grew thereafter at a faster rate than Islam. The major difference is in the percentage of new adherents who are converts. During the 1970–85 period, out of every 100 new Muslims, only six were converts, with the other ninety-four representing natalur increase. By contrast in the same period, twenty-one out of every 100 new adherents to Christianity were converts. 7

Any interpretation of African church growth begins with the continent’s diversity within fifty-nine countries and more than 1,000 people-groups. Adrian Hastings, in his history of contemporary African Christianity from 1950 to 1975, concludes:

Perhaps the sheer complexity and degree of hard diversification now apparent in African Christianity is the best proof of its having taken root. The only safe generalisation about its condition in the 1970s seems to be that one cannot generalise, . . . The total impres­sion of these years is one not just of expansion but of expansion into a new scale of complexity. 8

You may have wondered how David Barrett arrived at his statistics concerning evangelization in Africa. They resulted from an inventory of each country or people-group of 206 factors af­fecting their awareness of Christianity, Christ, and the gospel. Barrett concluded the number of Christian worship centers, of national work­practicing Christians. Other factors favoring evangelization in­cluded religion. A third set of factors concerned evangelism and witness­whether outreach by individual Christians, by local churches, or service agencies at work. He asked about such hindrances to faith-whether or not there were indigenous hymn-writing, Christian religions, and Christians being considered part of an alien media-both printed materials and electronic media. A fourth category of factors concerned how indigenous Christianity had become—whether not there were indigenous hymn-writing, theologues, new missionary societies, and renewal movements. Finally, he asked whether evangelistic outreach extended to all regions and population groups in the country. These are but a few of the factors Barrett analyzed, but they give some flavor of this comprehensive analysis. Accepting the diversity of the data, let us now examine in greater detail seven key factors, with ex­amples from Africa of each.

Holistic Mission

This factor is a central characteristic of Christianity throughout Africa. Holistic mission is the recognition that witness and obe­dience to Christ involve not only our personal relationship to God through Christ but our total life in community. There is no dual­ism that would confine religion to the realm of the “spiritual.” Instead, all of life is understood to be religious by its very nature if not expressed content. John Mbiti expressed it well in African Religions and Philosophy as he wrote: “There is no formal dis­tinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion.” 9

In a chapter in African Challenge, on evangelization in the African independent churches, Luntadila Ndala-Za-Za-Fwa tells the story of the growth of his own church, the largest African in­dependent church, the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth, through the prophet Simon Kimbangu. He relates the similarities of the founding of the Kimbanguists in 1921 at Nkamba, Simon Kim­bangu’s village, to the first Pentecost. Not only was there a power­ful manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but people shared food in common with the crowds of pilgrims. He describes the ensuing custom as “a great competition in generosity, to the benefit of the mutual aid and development by which our Church has been able to become entirely self-supporting.” He goes on to tell of the church’s present “huge programme of development for the benefit of the whole population, without distinction of race or creed.” It includes cooperative farms, agricultural communi­ties, a People’s House at Kinshasa, a large hospital and medical school, and other schools both for pastors and for masons. The stated philosophy is that every person is one’s brother or sister, and that the gospel means serving one’s neighbor. 10

A second illustration comes out of troubled Uganda. In a 1982 interview entitled “Awesome Growth in Troubled Uganda,” Bishop Festo Kivengere of the Anglican Church of Uganda, one of Africa’s best-known evangelists, tells of persecution under Idi Amin: “Pressures were on. Harassments were on. Many ar­rests took place. Here and there people began to die. But the church grew. People realized their only hope was in the preaching of the fulness of the gospel.” 11

From Ethiopia also comes a story of the growth of the African church amid persecution—this time of the Lutheran Evangelical Church, Makane Yesus, during the Marxist revolution from 1974 to 1982. While the masses chanted ideological slogans (“‘We must destroy our enemies,” “Religion is drugging the masses,” and even “God is dead”), tens of thousands of Christians were imprisoned. But Christians continued to witness for their faith. They obeyed the government where they could, disobeyed where they felt they must, but accepted imprisonment for their diso­bedience. In 1980 the economy collapsed and famine was wide­sread. Without resources to keep thousands of political prisoners, the government released them. With their release came a flood tide of people into the churches, filling them to overflowing. 12 All three of these examples illustrate our first key factor—a holistic understanding of the gospel and of the church’s mission.

Spontaneous Witness

A second factor, that of spontaneous witness, was also a key factor in the growth of the early church. Today among the Makane Yesus of Ethiopia, it is the “vital life-stream” of the church’s growth: “Witness to Christ did not have to be organized. Each new convert knew that what he or she has was good news. In a spontaneous way every Christian became a witness.” 13

From another source comes a parallel report from 1982 on the growth of the Kale-Heywet Church, the largest of Protestant churches in Ethiopia that grew out of the Sudan Interior Mission. A German visitor reports that the growth of the Ethiopian church was due to the intensive missionary activity of its membership. One Ethiopian pastor expressed it succinctly: “When people are converted in our country, they become an evangelist the same day.” 14

This also has been a major characteristic of the East African Revival Movement. Begun in 1928, it remains a powerful force for evangelization throughout East Africa. Bishop Kivengere de­scribes it as “today a convert; tomorrow, into the market place with a message to share.” The converts become the missionaries, taking it as their duty and joy to share.

Indigenous Leadership and the Missionary Role

Closely related to this second key factor of spontaneous witness
WOULD YOU BELIEVE?

The following countries could fit within Africa:

China 3,705,287 sq. mi.
U.S.A 3,615,102
India 1,269,338
Europe 1,006,176
Argentina 103,736
New Zealand 11,668,035 sq. mi.

The area of Africa is 11,706,166 sq. mi.

is the third—indigenous leadership. Several leaders stress its importance in outreach to traditionally nomadic peoples. Bishop David Gitari of Kenya, a member of the Strategy Working Group of the Lausanne Continuation Committee, related plans to reach the Gabbra people of northern Kenya. Although some Christian contact had been established with perhaps 80 percent of this nomadic people, less than 5 percent were professing Christians. The joint strategy committee agreed that the only effective plan would be to make it possible for the Gabbra Christian to remain in his pastoral life. It would require an evangelist living, working, and moving with the Gabbra—if you will, a “nomadic evangelist.”17

Further to the northwest in Kenya live the Turkana people. A relentless drought from 1979 to 1983 forced many of the more than 200,000 Turkana into relief settlements. The Kenya government planned to maintain the relief feeding programs for only three years. The Africa Inland Church (AIC) believed this was a kairos time for evangelization among the Turkana. Moses Bulali is an AIC missionary within his own country. Together with thirteen lay evangelists, he has planted nineteen churches among the Turkana, mostly since the drought began. He estimates that 50,000 of the 200,000 Turkana already had heard their witness by 1983. His goal is ambitious—to multiply the number of Africa Inland Mission lay evangelists in order “to preach the gospel to every Turkana within the next three years and to multiply churches throughout the settlement camps.”18

The Self-Supporting Church
As in contemporary China and Korea, self-support is a key factor in recent African church growth. Despite their denominational wealth, the Southern Baptists held to a policy of local self-support of African churches in Uganda. Van Rheenen reports, “In almost every case, buildings were built, preachers were paid, and finances for evangelism came from the resources of the national Christians.”20

This has been one of the strengths of African independent churches and a secret of their growth. While serving in 1975 as dean of studies of the Mindolo Ecumenical Centre in Kitwe, Zambia, I was approached by three leaders of the Apostles of John church in Luanda not only supported its own pastor in full but paid the salary of an evangelist engaged in church planting in northern Angola where former refugees were being resettled. Of churches visited in thirteen African countries, this was the most vigorous and also the most self-reliant.

Church Planting a Priority
Bishop Festo Kivengere calls the growth of the Anglican Church
of Uganda “natural spontaneous growth rather than planned growth.” Nevertheless, each congregation looks at itself as a missionary base intending to produce new churches. The bishop believes that each congregation should produce “at least two new congregations a year.” In one year 150 new churches were planted in his small diocese.24

In Nigeria the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA), which developed out of the Sudan Interior Mission, is among the fastest growing of denominations. Panya Baba, mission and evangelism secretary for the church, tells how in the mid-1970s church leaders had set their sights on fifty new churches in the next five years, since most members lived in northern Nigeria, a stronghold of Islam. Instead they planted 200 churches, and added 300 new ones in the following five years. This meant in 1983 that one-quarter of ECWA’s 2,000 congregations had been established in less than ten years. Panya Baba says that a primary reason for such effectiveness is “a commitment to evangelism and church planting as ministry priorities. Everything else is secondary to these fundamental objectives.”25

Conservative Baptists report a similar intentionality from Rwanda in Central Africa in a program begun in 1977. Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa, with most of the people living near their fields in scattered villages. Often the first church contact comes in the form of a letter from key Christians who have moved into an area. After securing a new church site from the government, the main mission thrust is launched. Missionaries, pastors, lay workers, and Bible school students meet in the new area for ten days to three weeks. They visit in every home, share the gospel, and invite persons to afternoon meetings. After the evangelistic meeting, new converts and resident Christians are invited to join the new church. In this way 140 organized chapels were established in the first four years. But the Conservative Baptist’s Rwandan leaders are not stopping there. The Rwanda government has divided the country into 143 communes. Conservative Baptists already are in forty-three of them and have set a goal of planting churches in every one of the communes by the year 2000.26

The Web of Community

A sixth important factor in African church growth is recognition of the web of community. In much of Africa the nineteenth-century missionary thrust took people out of their natural communities when they became Christians. Freed slaves, orphan children, women running away from forced marriages—all were converts of that type. Today the scene is different. Sometimes the decision is made to seek for group conversions. Consider, for example, the case of Vincent Donovan working among the Masai in Tanzania.

A Holy Ghost Father, Donovan believed that the missionary’s task was to proclaim the gospel and not predetermine the shape of the church that might result. “Preach not the church, but Christ” was his appeal. It was hard for him at first to understand that the real community among the Masai meant that they would act as a unit, accepting you or rejecting you altogether.

At the end of the evangelization of the first six Masai communities, Donovan relates, he began his instruction, saying:

“This old man sitting here has missed too many of our instruction meetings. He will not be baptized with the rest. These two on this side will be baptized because they always attended, and understood very well what we talked about. So did this young mother. She will be baptized. But that man there has obviously not under-

stood the instructions. And that lady there has scarcely believed the gospel message.”

Then the old man, Ndangoya, stopped him politely but firmly, “Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? . . . Yes, there are ones with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith. Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones and the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? From the first day I have spoken for these people. And I speak for them now. . . . we have reached the step in our lives where we can say, ‘We believe.’ ”

And Father Donovan looked at the old man Ndangoya and replied:

“Excuse me, old man. Sometimes my head is hard and I learn slowly. ‘We believe,’ you said. Of course you do. Everyone in the community will be baptized.”27

Such a growing together in community is closely related to the development of the small Christian communities (SCCs) in the Catholic church in Africa. Unlike their Latin American counterparts, they tend to be more pastoral and less political in nature. But their purpose, as Bishop Patrick Kalimbome of Malawi stated, is that “the Church is to become deeply present in all aspects of life and activity as the salt, leaven, and light of humankind.”28

Prayer and Liturgy

African Christians prefer to speak of church growth, not as their own accomplishment but as the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in their midst. In a recent book on the traditional spirituality of the Kikuyu and Meru people of Kenya, entitled Ngai, We Belong to You, James Kihara gives a closing exhortation to Christians entitled “Prayer: An Act of Evangelisation.” This is his admonition:

The Church’s presence in evangelisation has been strongly based on the witness of charity, for example, in education, social development, health, etc. While all these services are excellent, they are only one aspect and in many cultural situations, neither impress religiously nor are they a clear sign of the divine presence.

He continues:

The deep sense of prayer in non-Christian religions constitutes a challenge to the Christians. The Church must present herself, not only as an organization interested in works of charity and cultural and social development, but also, and above all, as a praying community. Prayer must not only be a companion of evangelisation, it is essentially an act of evangelization.29

Rev. Luntadila Ndala-za-Fwa picks up the same theme in his stages of evangelization in the Kimbanguist Church. The last two are prayer and the preparation of the future. At the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the church by Simon Kimbangu in his own village of Nkamba, the faithful received the body and blood of Christ for the first time. Until this time it had not been their practice to celebrate the Eucharist. Together with the spiritual retreats that followed, the faithful were to be brought to what the writer calls “a full sense of responsibility . . . till every one understands that he is a militant, an evangelizer responsible for making Christ the Saviour known to all around him.”30

The Eucharist became a vital factor also in the second stage of evangelization among the Hambukushu Angolan refugees in Botswana. Ronald Wynne relates how the introduction of the Eucharist gradually both deepened the devotion of the people
and increased considerably the number of the baptized. He con-
tinued:

One Christmas, the eucharist was celebrated at the largest village,
where the number of Christians was small. During that service
something happened. At the offertory procession, the chief’s wife
(not then baptized) brought a reed basket that she had woven. She
offered it with a beautiful gesture, holding it up with both hands,
kneeling with her face averted. During the consecration prayer
there was a stillness that could be felt. The leading headman was
among those who received communion. The strong, conservative
chief was overcome. The eucharist brought about his conversion
and that of many others. Within two months the number of bap-
tized had increased in that village from sixteen to 111. And since
the eucharist has been introduced, the total number of the baptized
has increased by more than half as much again. Truly the eucharist
converts!

Note the openness for those growing in faith but not yet in full
standing as members to the sacrament. The Eucharist had become
a powerful means of inclusion rather than exclusion.

The Task Ahead

In 1973 David Barrett wrote an essay entitled “The Discipling
of Africa in This Generation.” He began his argument with the
bold statement that “for one hundred years now, the most
massive influx into the churches in history has been taking place
on the African continent.” But the very success of the church
posed for it a new challenge—the increase in what Barrett called
“the nominal fringe” as “a direct product of successful and
ongoing Christian mission.”

In the World Christian Encyclopedia Barrett has shown that
although the numbers of practicing Christians have increased
rapidly, the number of nominal Christians is growing also. Whereas
he estimated that there would be 149.6 million practicing Chris-
tians on the continent in mid-1985, he estimates that there will
be 158.9 million nominal Christians by the year 2000.

Barrett questions whether the African churches are ready for
the task ahead in the “Global Discipling Era.” He recalls that
the criteria for being a Christian in New Testament days were
few and simple: confession with the lips, belief in the heart, and
some signs of active discipleship. In contrast, he finds today that
the process of initiation into some African churches has become
“more legalistic than at many other periods in the history of the
expansion of Christianity.” But he remains hopeful that the
African churches will acknowledge their responsibilities for dis-
cipling and establish clear priorities to accomplish it. He con-
cludes: “If this is done, the Church of AD 2000 in Africa may
well become the most effective missionary church of any continent
or era.”

Notes


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17. “The Unreached Gabbra: A Plan to Reach a Nomadic People,” in
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