

AWAKENING
Africa
REPORT

Insights for Kingdom Mobilisation

A MERGON REPORT



*Mergon is a trusted resource partner, investing to
bring about lasting change across Africa through
the redemptive story of God's unmerited grace.*



CONTENTS

FOREWORD

WHY THIS REPORT ON AFRICA?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.	<u>THE POTENTIAL OF AFRICA</u>	11
1.1	<u>Four key insights about Africa</u>	
1.2	<u>Strategic opportunities</u>	
1.2.1	<u>The potential of the youth bulge</u>	
1.2.2	<u>Unlocking the power of women</u>	
1.2.3	<u>Developing Christ-centred leadership</u>	
2.	<u>UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN WORLDVIEWS</u>	31
2.1	<u>Brief introduction to the traditional African worldview</u>	
2.1.1	<u>African traditional religion</u>	
2.2	<u>Three key attributes of the African worldview</u>	
2.3	<u>Implications for mission work</u>	
3.	<u>REACHING THE LEAST-REACHED</u>	42
3.1	<u>Strategic missional regions</u>	
3.1.1	<u>Sahel / West Africa</u>	
3.1.2	<u>Swahili coast / Madagascar</u>	
3.1.3	<u>The Horn of Africa</u>	
3.2	<u>Changing the missional landscape in Africa</u>	
4.	<u>A CONTINENT IN TRAUMA</u>	59
4.1	<u>The 'past is not dead, it's not even past'</u>	
4.1.1	<u>The impact of generational trauma</u>	
4.2	<u>The value of systems thinking when working in Africa</u>	
5.	<u>THE AFRICAN CHURCH</u>	67
5.1	<u>A brief history of the church in Africa</u>	
5.2	<u>African initiated churches (AICs)</u>	
5.3	<u>The impact of the prosperity gospel</u>	
5.4	<u>The church in North Africa</u>	
5.5	<u>The theological health of pastors in Africa</u>	
6.	<u>MONEY AND POWER IN AFRICA</u>	86
6.1	<u>How to fund better</u>	
6.2	<u>The need for marketplace ministry in discipling Africa</u>	

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

CONTRIBUTORS



A satellite image of the African continent, showing its vast landmass and surrounding oceans. The land is depicted in shades of green, yellow, and brown, indicating different vegetation and terrain. The surrounding oceans are dark blue with visible whitecaps and cloud patterns. The text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

*Home to 54 countries and
1.2 billion people, and large
enough to fit the U.S., China,
India, Japan, Mexico, and much
of Europe combined, Africa's
scale is as vast as its potential.*

FOREWORD

Mergon is an African foundation, birthed from the African soil. Our roots run deep, back to 1980 when founder Francois van Niekerk, a near 'bankrupt' entrepreneur turned highly successful businessman, dedicated his business to serving God's kingdom - laying the foundation for what Mergon is today.

Mergon's vision is to see Africa and its people flourishing, reshaping the future of this extraordinary continent towards its full potential. We do this by partnering with ministry organisations that focus on the spiritual and social transformation of lives and communities in need throughout Africa. Through their efforts, Christ-centred leaders are being equipped and disciplined, people are hearing the good news for the first time, and Africa's next generation is being raised up to courageously shape the future. As hearts are transformed through the redemptive message of the kingdom, we believe that it will overflow into societal transformation - reshaping industries and nations, setting things right, restoring dignity, and renewing hope across this continent and beyond.

It is a big vision indeed, and of course, God doesn't intend for one organisation or generation to do it alone. Ultimately when hearts are knitted in partnership - built on trust, generosity and a deep appreciation of each other's gifts, cultures and realities - only then can we begin to see this vision fulfilled. As we journey in partnership with peer funders and ministries, we grow and are enriched in ways we could never have imagined, leading us to better serve and steward the resources and relationships entrusted to us.

This Africa report encapsulates many of these learnings, distilled over many years of walking alongside ministry partners. It also contains valuable insights and perspectives from African leaders we hold in high regard.

We trust this report will become a valuable asset to serve the global peer funding community investing into Africa. That, as stewards of kingdom resources, it will enable us to ask the right questions - inviting us to stay curious and to embrace all that's possible for this beautiful, diverse continent.

Our prayer is that this will envision and inspire you towards sustainable, redemptive funding in Africa. Join us in shaping Africa's bright future!



Pieter Faure
CEO - Mergon

WHY THIS REPORT ON AFRICA?

Africa is our passion. Its people are beautiful and resilient, filled with God-given potential. From a kingdom perspective, African leaders are some of the best leaders there are – sacrificial, servant-hearted and prepared to go anywhere with limited resources for the sake of the gospel. This is also the most Christian continent in the world with a massive youth dividend – our conviction is that Africa may well hold the key for world evangelisation over the next 100 years.

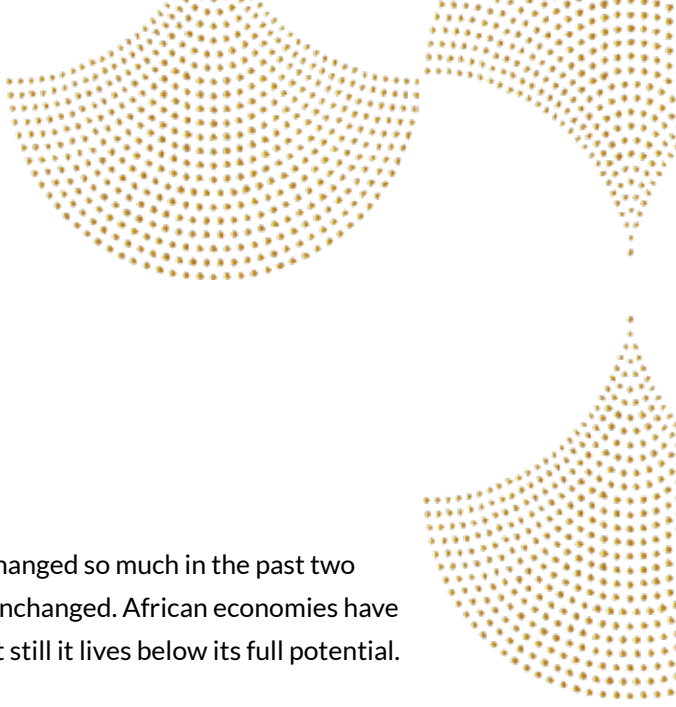
Why a report on Africa? We have worked across this continent for many years, partnering with hundreds of organisations who do incredible work towards the mission of God. As a learning organisation we have gained valuable perspectives. But there is a dearth of good knowledge sharing and no report that enables learning on a continent-level relating to kingdom work. Our hope is to contribute on this level, and to stimulate further conversations and research that will lead to a wider, collaborative ministry environment.

Throughout this report you will find insights and recommendations, but there are also questions. Not everything can be known, and we do not claim to be the experts on any of these subjects. Our hope is that in the sharing of ideas, in the joy of collaboration and in the hope of unity, God will lead us to where we need to be.

We have worked with many contributors to compile this report: ministry leaders, theologians, researchers and resource partners, to whom we are deeply grateful. These are people whose wisdom we trust and we commend them to you. Each has a deep love for Jesus as well as a mastery of their craft.

This is not an academic report. It is a collaborative kingdom report. Inasmuch as we have tried to draw from the most credible resources, at its core, this report captures our insights and perspectives towards a better strategy and ministry philosophy for Africa. There is much that needs to be done to realise the continent's potential. It will not yield easily. Rather, it will need to be shaped through informed hands and feeling hearts of people within and beyond its borders. Africa has yet to walk into its full destiny.





From a socio-economic point of view, the continent has changed so much in the past two decades, yet the perception of Africa remains relatively unchanged. African economies have outpaced many global counterparts over 20 years and yet still it lives below its full potential.

It holds the largest number of natural reserves and has 65% of the world's arable land – it is very rich indeed. Africa has missed out on the lion's share of the past industrial revolutions, but now it stands on the starting line with everyone else as the fourth revolution dawns. But more than anything we believe this continent and its people are powerful and filled with kingdom possibility, and although poised on a knife's edge – it most certainly is a force that has the potential to shape the world.

Africa is also very poor. It knows suffering and hardship. More than a third of the world's refugee population is found here. With all the arable land available Africans are hungry – more than 1 billion people in Africa struggle to afford a healthy diet and 30% of children on the continent suffer from stunted growth due to malnutrition. The church has millions of untrained pastors who lead scores of followers.

When one looks at Africa through the lens of its challenges, there is a very high mountain to climb. But through the eyes of faith, we see unique people groups discovering Jesus. We hear singing voices rising in worship. We see humility and a deep reverence for God. We see indigenously led ministries that courageously go into hard places with high impact. We see church planters moving across oceans to re-gospel other continents.

I invite you deeper into the story of Africa through the lens of this report. Please use it, share it, and add to it. Our great joy is to take hands together for the glory of God in the earth today.

'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' We passionately believe so.



Neil Hart
Executive Director - Mergon



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Africa is an extraordinary continent – vast, vibrant, and full of diversity. Each region has its unique cultural and geopolitical identity, from the bustling French markets of West Africa to the rolling savannahs of Swahili East Africa, from the Arabic peoples and deserts of the North to the vibrant economies and Christianity in the South. To truly understand Africa, it's important to recognise and respect these differences.

To have significant impact, we at Mergon aim to be a learning organisation that constantly grows in understanding of our partners' cultures, the contexts in which they operate, and the specific challenges they face. Relational authenticity that builds collaborative partnerships and levels the playing field has blessed us more than we could have imagined.

This report looks beyond the usual narrative of poverty and conflict. Instead, we see a continent with incredible potential to bless the world. The overall aim of this report is to provide experience-based insights and practical recommendations from ministry leaders, theologians, researchers and resource partners across Africa – for the sake of seeing the continent (and the world) truly transformed by the gospel.

In Chapter 1 we present the continent, and discuss three strategic opportunities that stand out as pivotal for transforming Africa and beyond through the gospel over the next 25 years: listening to and empowering Africa's youth; uplifting women through education and economic access; and developing Christ-centred leaders who combine cultural insight with a global perspective.

Chapter 2 explores the reality that in most African societies, religion is not confined to specific rituals or events – it shapes every aspect of life, from politics and economics to family and health. Unlike many religions, African traditional religion isn't something you convert to – you are born into it. This presents unique circumstances for sharing the gospel, which means that an empathetic understanding of African worldviews is fundamental for fruitful mission work on the continent.

Chapter 3 focusses on the more than 970 unreached people groups in Africa, representing over 420 million souls who have yet to hear the gospel. Yet the continent also boasts the largest Christian population in the world, with 631 million believers (projected to grow to 1.1 billion by 2050). Connecting these two means mobilising Africa's churches and broader Christian networks to bring the gospel to remote and resistant areas, especially in the Sahel/ West Africa, the Swahili coast / Madagascar, and the Horn of Africa. However, traditional mission approaches have proven insufficient to complete this task. We believe that a fresh mindset is needed – one that considers regional cultural and spiritual barriers and equips local believers to engage effectively.

Africa's rapid urbanisation is another factor that needs to be considered. By 2030, the continent will host over 10 mega-cities (cities with more than 10 million people), and by 2050, it is projected that 60% of Africa's population will live in urban settings. This will provide unprecedented access to communities that were once geographically or culturally isolated. Effective urban missions have therefore become essential, requiring innovative strategies and contextualised ministry.

In Chapter 4, we acknowledge that Africa's historical narrative is one marked by generational trauma, often amplified by external influences. For many the scars of violence, loss, and the daily struggle for survival severely affect their individual and communal well-being – and in such a context, traditional evangelism can often miss the mark because trauma inhibits people from fully engaging with the gospel.

It is our view that the continent's rich tapestry of interconnected systems requires more than a surface-level understanding – which draws mostly on assumptions and anecdotal evidence. In contrast, a systems-thinking approach invites curiosity, humility, and a willingness to see the world through another's eyes. It is about stepping back and making the effort to understand the bigger picture – and in the process uncovering solutions that align with the rhythms of local life. This approach fosters collaboration and deep learning, allowing mission efforts to be more impactful. As we shift how we see and engage with Africa, we open the door to fresh possibilities for gospel transformation.

Chapter 5 presents a compelling but brief history of the church in Africa, from Christianity's earliest roots in North Africa to the indigenisation of the church over the last 100 years. We list a few of the positive impacts of these African initiated churches, as well as some of the negative effects associated with their growth and practices. We also consider some of the factors driving the widespread appeal of the prosperity gospel, together with its regrettable social and economic implications.

The truth is, in Africa, the local church wields significant influence within its communities, with pastors often playing multi-faceted roles far beyond preaching. In rural areas especially, pastors frequently act as counsellors, community leaders, and even first responders in times of crisis – bearing immense burdens that affect their health, family life, and ministry. Many of these pastors lack access to sound theological training, leaving them ill-equipped to navigate the complex social and spiritual issues they face, and impacting the theological health of their congregation. It is crucial to address these challenges through affordable, accessible, context-sensitive training models and a focus on cultivating spiritual maturity and ethical leadership.



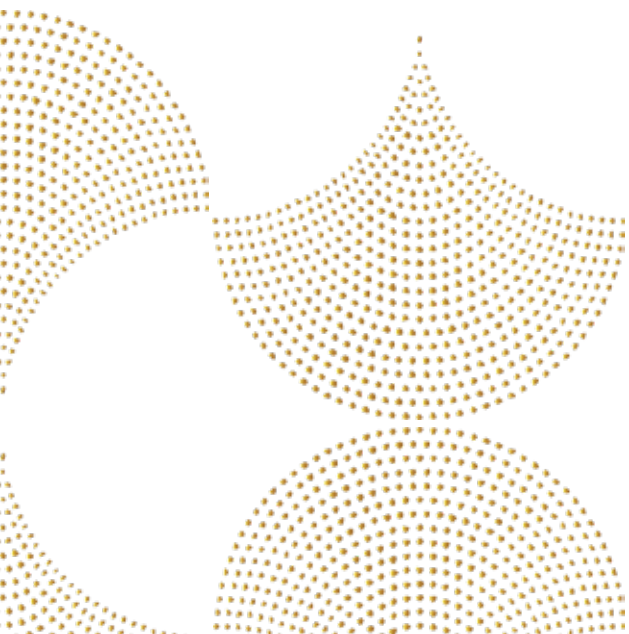


Sustainable kingdom impact involves creating long-lasting spiritual, social, and economic change that reflects Christ's teachings. For donors and theological organisations in Africa, supporting pastors is essential to achieving this goal, as they are at the forefront of serving and influencing their communities. Without healthy, biblically grounded pastors, the foundation of Christian ministry weakens, impacting both the spiritual life of congregants and the broader societal influence of the church.

Chapter 6 delves into the topic of the rich and sometimes chequered influence of Western funding on African socio-economic development. There is huge appreciation for the partnership with Western funders and an acknowledgement that this partnership is crucial to advancing the kingdom of God. However, from our experience and engagements with ministry partners on the continent, it has become clear that uninformed giving can do more harm than good. We therefore offer suggestions from local leaders to hopefully shape future giving in the region, maximising the positive impact of Western assistance and achieving sustainable growth of the church in Africa.

Lastly, we highlight the need for marketplace ministry in discipling Africa. Restoring the biblical understanding that all work is a divine calling, and that all types of work are integral to fulfilling God's purposes, is crucial for building a flourishing future on this continent. This has been a missing paradigm in the church and has great potential for kingdom work.

When reading this report, our hope is that your heart will be moved by God to see meaningful and lasting change. By raising leaders and shaping communities with informed intentionality, we can ensure that the seeds we plant today bear fruit for generations to come. Let us approach this sacred task with care, vision, and an enduring commitment to reflect God's glory on earth.





1

The potential of **Africa**



1

The potential of Africa

1.1 FOUR KEY INSIGHTS ABOUT AFRICA

Africa is not a country.

It is not even a homogenous continent, and it is very large indeed – the countries of India, China and the USA can all fit snugly into Africa with room to spare! West African people are ideologically and culturally different to East Africans, as are those from the South to those from the North. There are over [2,000 diverse languages](#) on the continent (the people of Nigeria alone speak 500 different languages).

Anyone working into Africa should therefore appreciate how extreme the differences may be from one region to another, and should be watchful not to lump their assumptions into one dough and try to bake them together.

Few people will view Africa through the lens of its potential, because the well-trodden narrative of poverty, aid and war is too well known to allow us to really think afresh about the continent. We see it differently. Africa has a redemptive potential in God to be the greatest blessing to the world over the next few decades.

Africa is:

THE YOUNGEST CONTINENT

with a median age of 19.7 years

THE MOST CHRISTIAN CONTINENT

with an urgent need for strong foundations

THE MOST URBANISING CONTINENT

with the urban population expected to triple over the next 40 years

A HIGHLY MISSIONAL CONTINENT

poised to become the greatest missional force

Global median age
is around

30.4

years



African median age
is around 19.7 years

19.7
years

Over

60%

under the age of
25

972

unreached people groups,
representing more than

420 million

people

The Christian population
grew from

9 million in 1900
to
380 million
in 2000

By 2030

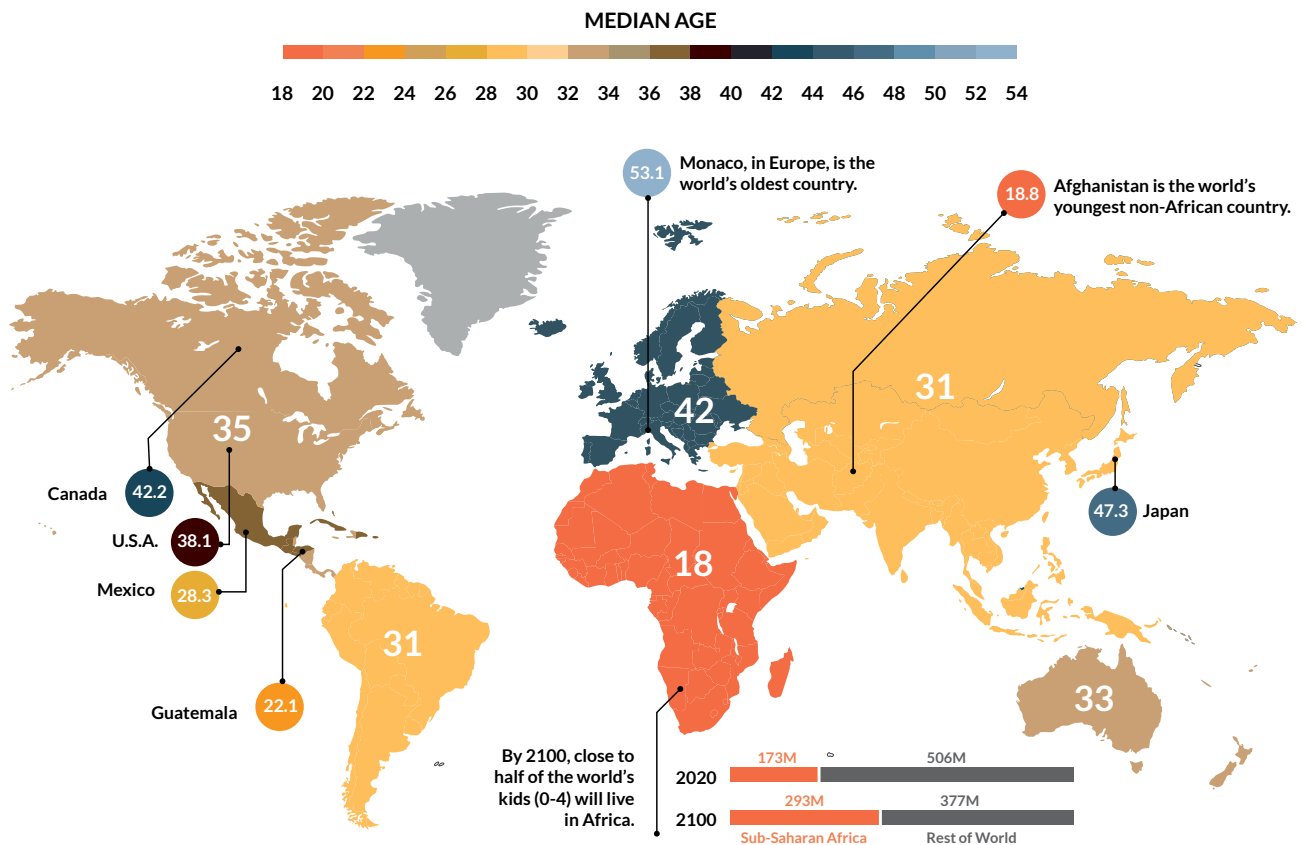
Africa is expected to
have more than

10

mega-cities

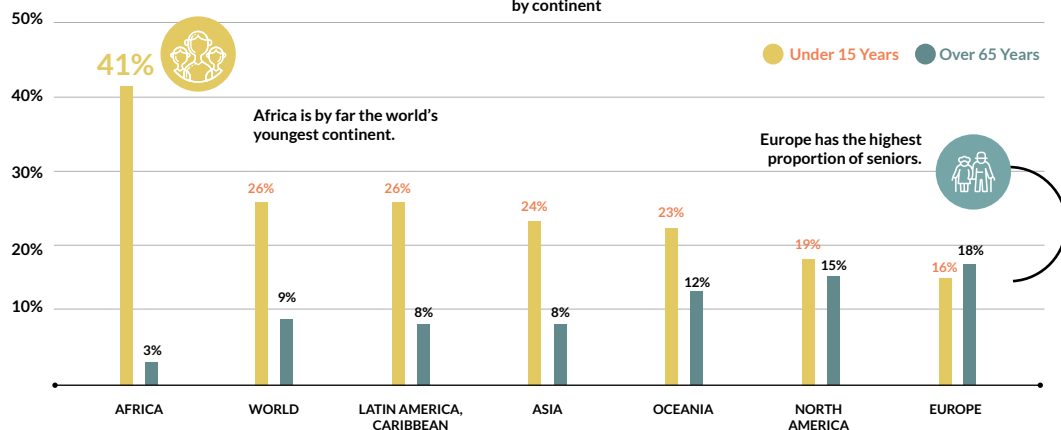
The Median Age of Continents

Africa has the world's youngest population, with a median age in the teens



Proportion of population

SELECT AGE GROUPS
by continent



YOUNGEST & OLDEST COUNTRIES
by median age



1. THE YOUNGEST CONTINENT - with a median age of 19.7 years

Population demographics	The median age in Africa is approximately 19.7 years, compared to a global median age of around 30.4 years. Over 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25. While most of the world is ageing and in population decline, by 2050, Africa's population is expected to double, reaching around 2.5 billion people, with over half of global population growth expected to come from Africa alone .
Youth dividend	Africa has the highest number of young people in the world, with around 200 million people aged between 15 and 24. Countries like Niger, Uganda, and Angola have some of the youngest populations, with median ages below 16 years . Young populations represent a potential demographic dividend – a period where the working-age population grows larger compared to dependents (children and the elderly).
Economic potential	A youthful population presents significant economic opportunities, with a potential for a large, dynamic workforce. This can fuel economic growth, drive political change and growth in consumer markets. However, youth unemployment remains a challenge across the continent.

2. THE MOST CHRISTIAN CONTINENT - with an urgent need for strong foundations

Largest Christian population	Africa is home to over 631 million Christians, which is nearly half of the continent's population. This number is projected to grow to 1.1 billion by 2050 , making Africa the continent with the largest Christian population in the world.
Rapid but shallow growth	Christianity in Africa has exploded from 9 million in 1900 to 380 million in 2000, yet much of this growth has outpaced discipleship efforts, leaving many Christians without strong biblical foundations.
A discipleship gap	While Africa has a high number of professing Christians, many churches struggle with theological depth, leadership development, and addressing the influence of prosperity theology and syncretism.
An urgent need for strong foundations	Without deep discipleship, Africa's growing Christian movement risks being vulnerable to false teachings, weak theological grounding, and limited missional impact.



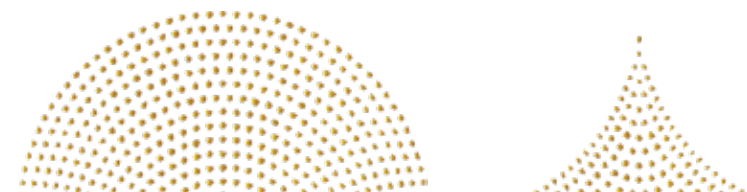


3. THE MOST URBANISING CONTINENT - urban population to triple over the next 40 years

Urban population growth	Africa has the fastest urban growth rate in the world, with the urban population expected to triple over the next 40 years . Currently, about 40% of Africa's population lives in urban areas, a figure projected to reach 60% by 2050.
Urbanisation rate	The urbanisation rate in Africa is around 3.5% per year, significantly higher than the global average of 2%. Major cities like Lagos, Kinshasa, and Cairo are among the fastest-growing urban centres globally.
Mega-cities	By 2030, Africa is expected to have more than 10 mega-cities (cities with populations exceeding 10 million), including Lagos, Kinshasa, and Cairo. Urban areas like Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Johannesburg are also experiencing rapid growth.
Slum population	A significant portion of urban growth is occurring in informal settlements or slums. Over 60% of Africa's urban population lives in slums, lacking basic services like clean water and sanitation.

4. A HIGHLY MISSIONAL CONTINENT - poised to become the greatest missional force

Missionary sending	Africa is increasingly becoming a mission-sending continent, with numerous indigenous missionary movements emerging. Countries like Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana are notable for sending missionaries to other parts of Africa and beyond. African missionary numbers are not measurable in the same way as many first-world places would measure sending. Africans often go without agencies, funded budgets and trackable data. Do we really know the extent of this force?
Unreached people groups	Africa is home to 972 unreached people groups, representing more than 420 million people. The least-reached regions include North Africa, the Sahel, and parts of the Horn of Africa.
Evangelical growth	Evangelical Christianity is growing rapidly in Africa, with many new church plants and evangelical movements. Pentecostal and charismatic movements are particularly strong, contributing to dynamic evangelism efforts.
Bible translation	Significant progress has been made in translating the Bible into African languages. However, many languages still lack a complete Bible. Notable collaborations like LuminAfrica and others are working to eradicate Bible poverty across the continent.





1.2 STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

Considering these key insights, coupled with our experience working with ministries all over Africa, we discuss three strategic opportunities that stand out as pivotal for transforming Africa and beyond through the gospel. If effectively addressed, it will likely give us a disproportionate return on effort and investment over the next 25 years. We would recommend a clearer focus on these three areas for anyone working on the continent:

- The potential of the youth bulge
- Unlocking the power of women
- Developing Christ-centred leadership

Due to the significant nature of these three areas, we have created a more comprehensive section on each for further reading and insights.

1.2.1 The potential of the youth bulge

Africa is bulging at the seams – over 60% of its population is under 25 years of age. In stark contrast to concerning rates of population decline elsewhere in the world, this ‘youth bulge’ is by far the greatest opportunity and challenge facing the continent. The youth bulge has far-reaching implications for economic development, social stability, political dynamics, as well as the future of Christianity in Africa... and perhaps the world.

It is widely recognised that there is a need for strategic investments in young people as an incredible source of energy, ideas, and solutions – insisting that their education, employment, and empowerment are essential for the continent’s peace and prosperity. Notably, Ghanaian Kofi Annan, during his tenure as UN Secretary-General, often highlighted that young Africans are the continent’s greatest asset and can drive positive transformation if provided with the right support. In his acceptance speech as chairperson of the African Union in 2018, Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, stated that “Africa’s defining challenge is to create a pathway to prosperity for our young people.”

These statements highlight the importance of harnessing the potential of Africa’s youth, especially when considering the economic, social, political, and spiritual impact of the youth bulge on the current and future state of the continent.

Economic impact of the youth bulge

A key potential benefit of the youth bulge is that Africa could soon experience a 'demographic dividend' – where the working-age population starts to outnumber dependents, leading to increased economic productivity and growth.

If African economies are not able to absorb the large number of people reaching working age over the next several decades, the youth bulge could result in high unemployment rates, social unrest, and increased pressure on already strained resources and infrastructure.

Realising this potential requires significant investments though, and herein lies an important kingdom opportunity to ensure that the youth are not only equipped with the skills and opportunities needed for gainful employment (referring to a work environment where the employee receives steady work, payment from the employer and that allows for self-sufficiency), but have the dignity of work.

The positive (or negative) economic impact of Africa's youth bulge therefore hinges on how effectively governments, the private sector, and international partners can implement the necessary economic investments in key areas such as education, technology, and infrastructure to transform youthful populations into productive and innovative workforces. It can be done!

For example, **Ethiopia's** substantial investments in reproductive health and family planning (especially in rural areas), as well as education (getting more girls into schools, and increasing the overall literacy rates) have shown positive results in economic growth and poverty reduction.

Kenya's demographic dividend has been driven by investments in education and technology – spurring innovation and earning the capital Nairobi the nickname 'Silicon Savannah'. The growth of the tech industry has created numerous job opportunities and contributed to Kenya's economic diversification.

And **Ghana's** focus on improving education has resulted in a more skilled and productive workforce. Coupled with sound macro-economic policies and political stability, this shift has attracted significant foreign investment, particularly in the mining, oil, and gas sectors. Moreover, the increase in the working-age population has boosted domestic consumption, driving economic growth and poverty reduction.

These examples demonstrate the potential for sustained economic growth, increased foreign investment, and enhanced domestic consumption, underscoring the importance of harnessing the demographic dividend for long-term prosperity.

Social impact of the youth bulge

The youth bulge in Africa carries significant social implications that can shape the continent's future in various ways, because of the inevitable shifts that occur in cultural norms, social dynamics and family structures. This underscores the importance of youth empowerment, participation in leadership and governance, and addressing youth-specific issues to foster inclusive and sustainable development across African societies.

For example, in **Nigeria**, the younger population cohort has been instrumental in shaping cultural norms and social dynamics through the burgeoning entertainment industry, particularly in Nollywood (Nigerian cinema) and the music scene. Nigerian youth, through Afrobeat music and Nollywood films, have not only influenced global cultural trends but also challenged societal norms around gender roles, fashion, and artistic expression. This cultural export has redefined Nigeria's image internationally and influenced domestic attitudes towards youth culture.

In **South Africa**, younger generations have played a pivotal role in post-apartheid societal transformation. Youth movements such as #FeesMustFall mobilised students across universities and reshaped public discourse on race, equality, and social justice, influencing policy debates and institutional reforms.

And **Kenya** has seen a rise in youth-led social media-driven movements such as #MyDressMyChoice, advocating for women's rights and challenging cultural attitudes towards gender-based violence. Initiatives in technology (such as market-leading mobile money platforms like M-Pesa) have revolutionised financial services, empowered youth entrepreneurs, and reshaped economic opportunities – playing a crucial role in shaping Kenya's modern identity and societal values.

Political impact of the youth bulge

Between 2020 and 2024, Africa witnessed several instances of political instability that were significantly influenced by its youth (not to mention the role youth played in the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in 2010). From the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria to the pro-democracy movements in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), young people have been at the forefront, demanding systemic reforms and challenging entrenched power structures. These events underscore the influence of Africa's youth in shaping the continent's political landscape amidst growing calls for accountability and democratic governance. (For a timely, scholarly view on this topic, please refer to the 2022 book *Youth-led Social Movements and Peace Building in Africa*, edited by Ibrahim Bangura, or [its outline here](#).)

For example, **Sudan** experienced a military coup in October 2021 that ousted the transitional government. The youth, who had been instrumental in the 2019 revolution that led to the ousting of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir, were once again at the forefront of resistance. Young Sudanese organised mass protests and civil disobedience campaigns demanding a return to civilian rule. Despite a brutal crackdown by security forces, the resilience and leadership of the youth in these protests underscored their critical role in shaping Sudan's political landscape.

Senegal witnessed significant unrest in March 2021, following the arrest of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, who enjoyed substantial support among the youth. The protests were fuelled by economic grievances, allegations of corruption, and perceived attempts by President Macky Sall to undermine democratic processes. Young people, particularly from urban areas, were at the forefront of these demonstrations, which resulted in violent clashes with security forces and significant political instability.

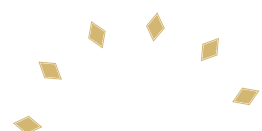
Eswatini saw a surge in pro-democracy protests in June 2021, led primarily by young activists. The demonstrators called for political reforms and an end to the absolute monarchy of King Mswati III. The youth-led protests were met with violent repression by security forces, leading to widespread unrest and international attention. The persistent demands for democratic governance highlighted the key role of young people in challenging entrenched authoritarianism in Eswatini.

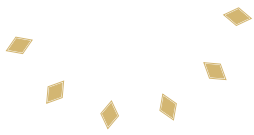
Spiritual impact of the youth bulge

Spiritually speaking, we need to take note of how the North African youth are challenging the dominant Islamic faith, with some turning toward atheism or agnosticism. This shift is attributed to several factors, including political disillusionment, socio-economic struggles, and the desire for personal freedom.

The Arab Spring of 2011 ignited widespread demands for political reform, which also fuelled a cultural and religious re-evaluation among the younger generation. In countries like **Tunisia**, **Morocco**, and **Algeria**, young people began questioning the role of religion in both public and private life, especially as they faced repression, unemployment, and corruption under governments that claimed religious legitimacy.

One of the critical drivers of this and similar trends is the power of the internet. Social media platforms and online forums have given African youth access to global perspectives, including secular and atheist viewpoints that were previously inaccessible. According to a survey by the Arab Barometer in 2019, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of people identifying as non-religious, particularly among those under the age of 30. In Tunisia, for example, the percentage of people identifying as non-religious increased from [15% in 2013 to 31% in 2019](#).





This growing secular movement has sparked controversy in societies where religion remains a deeply ingrained part of national identity. The rise of atheism among North African youth has led to increased tension with conservative religious institutions. Some governments have responded with tighter restrictions on speech and religious expression, fearing the destabilising effects of secularism. Despite these challenges, the push toward atheism reflects a broader desire among young people for intellectual freedom and the ability to question traditional norms without fear of reprisal.

For example, although #EndSARS in **Nigeria** was primarily a protest against police brutality, the movement saw young Christians actively involved, advocating for peaceful resistance and justice. The movement mobilised youth through technology and social media, creating a platform for young Christians to stand for human dignity, reshaping how youth approach issues of governance and spirituality in their contexts.

Similarly, the 2011 Y'en a Marre (meaning 'fed up') movement in **Senegal** included several Christian artists and activists who used especially rap music and door-to-door campaigning to protest ineffective government and encourage the youth to register to vote. It succeeded in ousting President Abdoulaye Wade and remains active, continuing to mobilise large numbers of young people to participate in societal leadership and advocate for peaceful democratic processes in West Africa.

CONCLUSION

Looking towards 2050, it is estimated that 1 in 4 people in the world will be from Africa. It therefore seems obvious that investing in the potential of the next generation in Africa becomes a huge focus of our combined kingdom efforts. It is also evident that youth in Africa are shaping the economic, social, and political fabric of the continent, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. We must therefore invest in longer term projects that will create equipped and economically engaged populations, through education, skills development, and work readiness programmes. This will lead to the next generation being filled with the hope of Christ for meaningful work and redeemed environments.

As we see youth continuing to play an important role in shaping the social fabric of society, we can develop more ethical leaders, motivated to serve and see a better future for the next generation, and invest in programmes that will empower communities and the voices raised in them. It is, however, crucial that all of this is supported through a focus on evangelising and discipling the next generation.

We have the great opportunity to see a 'faith dividend' emerge - a majority proportion of people actively engaged with the gospel and assimilated into vibrant and sound faith communities, steadily increasing to impact the world.

1.2.2 Unlocking the power of women

Africa is known as a predominantly patriarchal society, but scratch the surface and you will find that women form the bedrock of the continent. And even though widespread gender-based discrimination prevents women and girls from full educational, civic and economic participation, the incredible role they can play becomes evident when a community is exposed to the gospel, as Carole Ward of Favor International testifies, “When women learn the principles of the Word of God combined with economic empowerment, everything changes. In fact, the entire community is impacted.” This section draws on interviews with women from across the continent, whose firsthand accounts lend credibility to the insights offered below.

Women make up over 50% of Africa’s population, yet they continue to face threats, attacks, shame, and violence for simply expressing their needs – or for simply being born female. In North Africa, though 90% of young women and 73% of young men who responded to the 2017 Arab Youth Survey suggested that their leaders should do more to improve the personal freedoms and human rights of women – those women and girls who do take initiative regarding their own empowerment often face backlash, or in extreme cases, honour killing.

Through our partnerships with ministries focussed on women, we have witnessed how empowering a woman can transform an entire family. A woman’s influence extends deeply into her home and the lives of her children, making her empowerment a catalyst for uplifting those around her. It is a crucial strategy for lifting people out of poverty and creating more flourishing societies. Uncapping the powerful role that women can play, however, will depend on how successfully we can overcome several significant barriers – some of which are discussed below.

Discrimination based on traditional gender roles

In many African countries, traditional gender roles, patriarchal systems, and cultural expectations have deep generational roots, directly influencing women’s access to leadership, education, or economic opportunities.

Even in regions where women’s networks exist, their participation is limited, and they are excluded from significant leadership platforms, especially in mixed-gender gatherings. This exclusion also limits the opportunities available to women to influence policies that could benefit them.

Discrimination starts at birth. For example, in some parts of Ethiopia, when a woman gives birth to a baby boy the ululation (a joyful vocal celebration) is done four times, whereas it is done only three times for a girl – indicating her lower social status. Also, women and girls are not allowed to laugh loudly and or eat in public, and from a young age, girls are expected to help their mothers in the kitchen and serve others. West Africa is no different. Amele from Togo states: “In Africa, and especially in our French-speaking communities, women are considered as inferior, with no right to speak among men. We have discrimination in the distribution of positions of responsibility – a woman’s role is limited to housework and bringing up children, and in remote villages, poverty drives them into forced marriages and early pregnancies.”

“

*Women make up over 50% of Africa's population,
yet they continue to face threats, attacks, shame,
and violence for simply expressing their needs –
or for simply being born female.*



Discriminatory laws limit women's rights compared to men. Marital property laws in some nations deny women equal ownership rights, making it difficult for them to secure land or inherit property. Inheritance laws and practices favour men, leaving women destitute or dependent on male relatives after the death of a spouse. African women also have reduced access to loans, with financial institutions sometimes requiring male guarantors. In Lagos, Nigeria, for example, single women find it almost impossible to rent an apartment (even if they can afford it) because landlords insist on leasing to men or to established couples.

Lack of access to education

In many parts of Africa, girls are kept at home to care for babies and do household chores, with education being discouraged (or denied outright). When economic hardships prevent children from going to school, and because families are large and resources scarce, boys' education is prioritised over girls'. In North Africa the out-of-school rate for primary education is 11% for girls, compared to 9% for boys. In lower-secondary education, it is 18% for girls, compared to 12% for boys. The higher the level of education, the more likely girls are to be excluded.

Furthermore, it is common for girls to stop attending school when they begin menstruating, both in cities and rural areas. Some cultures view menstruation as unclean, leaving girls without safe options for staying in public. This, in addition to the lack of access to sanitary products, means they miss out on large portions of their schooling, or drop out entirely. There is a basic need to provide this form of care and to educate families on supporting teenage girls through these stages of development.

Child marriage

Although the overall rate of child marriage has been decreasing over the last few decades, the law in many countries still allows for girls to be 'married off' as young as 14 or 15 years old, limiting their educational opportunities and economic independence. In Southern Africa child marriage is still very high. According to Unicef, 30% of girls are getting married before the age of 18. In North Africa, 20% of girls are currently getting married before the age of 18, but this is showing signs of increasing in areas affected by ongoing conflict. The crisis in Syria, for example, has led to child marriage being used as a coping mechanism by families facing economic pressure and also as a protection measure for girls in the face of insecurity.

Violence against women and girls

Gender-based violence (GBV), including intimate partner violence, is a harsh reality of life for many women. Especially teenage girls are subjected to both physical and psychological violence by male relatives. In the North African region almost half of female murder victims (47%) are killed by family members or intimate partners, compared to about 6% of males.

[AfroBarometer research](#) shows that South Africans view GBV as the most important women's-rights issue facing government and society. South Africa has one of the world's highest GBV

rates in the world, with nearly half (48%) of citizens saying violence against women and girls is a 'somewhat common' or 'very common' occurrence in their local community. Across the Southern African region, data shows that roughly [17% of women](#) experience forced sex during their lifetime. Sadly the systemic physical, emotional, and psychological violence against women and girls has become so normalised that many cases go unreported, despite the severity of the issue. Older women often silence victims, viewing violence as the 'lot of women.'

Employment constraints

Across Africa, women earn less than men, often working in lower-paying sectors. They face a number of constraints when trying to access good quality jobs. First, their participation in the labour market and public decision-making are subject to cultural expectations regarding the primacy of domestic responsibilities. For example, the 2017 International Men and Gender Equality Survey by UN Women found that between 65% and 75% (depending on country) of men considered a woman's most important role as caring for the household. What is interesting, is that both men and women overwhelmingly supported (around 75%) the priority of men's access to employment over women's.

"if women in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) enjoyed the same economic opportunities as men, it would boost the region's GDP by 47%."

Second, discriminatory work practices abound, from sexual harassment, to lower remuneration and a lack of policies supporting working mothers. Third, the restricted mobility of women and girls (especially in North Africa) severely limits their ability to socialise, travel, and identify work opportunities. These obstacles have serious consequences for the women themselves and the continent as a whole. For example, a 2015 study by McKinsey calculated that if women in Middle East North Africa (MENA) enjoyed the same economic opportunities as men, the region would gain US\$2.7 trillion by 2025, boosting GDP by 47%.

Theological repression

Theological repression of women refers to the restriction or limitation of women's roles, rights, and status within religious contexts. Across various religious traditions, interpretations of sacred texts and the traditions built around them have historically been used to justify the subordination of women, often confining them to specific social and familial roles. For example, in Islam, the Quran and Hadiths (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) have been interpreted by some to limit women's roles in religious and public life. Some African traditional religions and indigenous belief systems assign distinct roles to men and women, often rooted in cultural views of family, social order, and religious practice.

Yet this repression extends even to many Christian communities, where wives are taught that biblical submission means prioritising the husband's needs and preferences above all. In Cameroon, a pastor's wife explained that her husband is referred to as 'my king' and that, under no circumstances, may she contradict him or have a difference in opinion – even if his demands contradict Scripture. She referenced scriptures commonly used to reinforce male leadership.

In East Africa, there are Christian women who have to serve dinner to their husbands and guests on their knees. Other times, women watch the men eat and then only once they are finished are they allowed to eat.

Lack of biblical theological training across Africa, especially for men, perpetuates these ideologies. Healthy role models, mentoring and guided discipleship of both men and women are desperately needed. This theological training is necessary for men and women, but the starting point may be with men. Many well-meaning women simply follow teachings without question, rarely encouraged to think critically about Scripture.

CONCLUSION

To bring about lasting transformation across Africa, it's firstly essential that the view of women changes and that they are valued for how God created them. Secondly, it is important to uplift women and girls at all levels of society – empowering them through education, economic access, and leadership opportunities can create a ripple effect that benefits entire communities.

Granting rights to women is important, but ensuring those rights are actively utilised is even more critical. This requires a nuanced empowerment approach – where the focus isn't so much on gender equality as on gender equity. Gender equality refers to everyone having equal access to opportunities and resources. Gender equity, however, focusses on fairness. A key component of social justice, it recognises that different genders face unique challenges, and ensures that resources are used where they are most needed to create balance (and emotional buy-in). Collaboration between genders is vital for societal growth and healing divides.

A key priority is the theological health of African pastors (more about this topic again later) so that they no longer reinforce gender discrimination, but start looking beyond the traditional roles expected of women, through the lens of how God sees women. Mothers and daughters need people (especially Christian men) to champion, empower and encourage them. They need to know that they have agency, that they are loved, and that God has a purpose for them.

Another area to focus on is the education of girls and young women. Without education, women are more vulnerable to exploitation, including forced labour, abuse, and trafficking. Rev. Esmé Bowers from the World Evangelical Alliance affirms that educated women are better equipped to challenge traditional barriers to women's empowerment: "Education provides women with the skills to challenge gender norms, use their voice, assert their roles, and better understand their rights. Educated women are also more likely to report cases of gender-based violence which can help reduce overall tolerance of violence toward women."

The New Testament provides beautiful examples of women in various forms of leadership and different roles, including being instrumental in the spread of the gospel in the early church. Ed Silvoso, in his book *Women: God's Secret Weapon*, writes that part of God's end-time strategy includes a powerful host of women rising to defeat the enemy. He references Psalm 68 and emphasises the role of men as protectors, releasing women to fulfil their destinies.

We thank Mandi Hart for her meaningful contribution to this section on unlocking the power of women.

1.2.3 Developing Christ-centred leadership

Africa does not have a limited supply of kingdom leadership potential – it has that in abundance. What Africa is short on is leaders who have broad, global perspectives, who are willing to build away from themselves (give away power) for the sake of raising the people of Africa.

Developing effective and wise leadership is possibly one of the most important ways the global body of Christ can collaborate in Africa. Because African leaders embody such a humility to learn and an eagerness to grow, mining this potential has to be one of the best low-hanging fruit for Christian funders or ministries who have capacity and are willing to walk a journey of developing Christ-centred leaders on the continent. Healthy leadership requires intentional investment and will have an exponential return on effort and create sustainability in the body of Christ for generations to come. The converse is also true – growth built around poor leadership will continually erode efforts for the kingdom.

Four positive characteristics of African leadership

Any leadership development efforts should start with an understanding of African leadership. What follows are some highlights of African leadership as well as the potential that lies waiting for further growth.

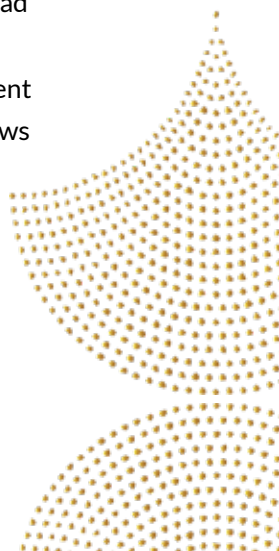
African leadership is community-centric

One of the most profound contributions to leadership thought from Africa is the concept of *ubuntu*, which means “I am because we are.” Leaders like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu emphasised that true leadership is about serving the community and fostering a sense of collective responsibility. African leadership often focusses on the well-being of the community as a whole rather than just individual success. This perspective is crucial for building inclusive, supportive environments where everyone can thrive. The concept of *ubuntu* reflects Jesus’ teachings on loving and serving others (John 13:34–35).

African leadership is culturally intelligent

Leaders in Africa are very aware of cultural cues. There is a general, deep respect for African cultural heritage and traditions. Understanding and honouring these cultural contexts can lead to more effective and authentic leadership development. They also place a high value on the wisdom of elders. Incorporating their knowledge and experiences into leadership development can provide valuable insights and guidance. In the West we are taught that to speak first shows intellect and leadership potential. In Africa wise leaders always speak last.

Jesus often engaged with people within their cultural contexts, using parables and examples relevant to their lives (Matthew 13:34–35). He showed respect for cultural practices and festivals, as did Paul at Mars Hill and in several other scenarios.





Jesus also demonstrated sensitivity to cultural and social differences, such as his interactions with Samaritans and Gentiles, challenging norms to show that his message was for all people (John 4:9–10).

African leadership is resilient and adaptable

The challenging history of Africa has shaped resilience in its leaders, teaching them the importance of perseverance and adaptability in successfully navigating complexity. This has fostered a resourcefulness that lies at the heart of leadership potential. African leaders are innovative and will often try various solutions to overcome challenges. African scholars emphasise the need for leaders to adapt their strategies to the specific political, economic, and social contexts in which they operate, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. Jesus likewise faced significant opposition and adversity throughout his ministry but remained steadfast in his mission.

African leaders link spirituality to all of life

World-renowned African leaders have highlighted the role of spirituality in guiding ethical leadership. Clearly connecting biblical values to areas of governance, politics and society is not out of place and can help leaders maintain a strong moral compass and a sense of purpose. John Mbiti, the Kenyan-born Christian philosopher and writer, stresses the importance of ethical and spiritual foundations in leadership, guiding leaders to act with compassion, justice, and integrity. For most Africans, there is no area of life that is not somehow connected to the spiritual.

Suggestions for developing Christ-centred leadership

There are some overarching challenges that good leadership development can solve, which will have a huge impact on societies and draw out the fuller potential of the continent.

Theology training of spiritual leaders

One of the challenges facing the church in Africa, is that there are approximately 1 million untrained pastors in Africa (more on this topic in Chapter 5). The impact of this can be seen in a sometimes ‘weak’ Christianity, where due to poor theology, congregants are easily led astray. It can lead to unbiblical cultural practices, and because spirituality is so closely linked to culture in Africa, there can be a tendency to include non-biblical cultural practices in ‘normal’ church life. Poor theology can also disconnect Christianity from society, leading to people feeling that it is irrelevant to their lives.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Theology training:* We need hundreds of effective theology training ministries spread across the continent to help solve this challenge in the body of Christ.
- *Worldview training:* Educate Christians to understand a biblical worldview through a variety of ministry activities.

- *Church strengthening programmes:* There is a need for ministries that come alongside pastors to help them 'see' the communities they operate in and become relevant to them.
- *Contextual theology:* Develop theologies that integrate African cultural contexts, promoting unity without compromising doctrine.

Societal instability

Another challenge on the continent is the frequent political upheaval, corruption, and weak governance that hinder leadership development. Corruption damages public confidence in leaders, and instability disrupts long-term growth plans, which prompts skilled individuals to emigrate and creates a talent drain. Gospel strategies that do not shy away from societal challenges can help to change environments.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Ethical training:* Emphasise integrity in leadership and help leaders to see beyond the church to all of society.
- *Institutional support:* Strengthen governance frameworks, understanding of wise stewardship, and building sustainable environments.
- *Political engagement:* Encourage active participation in governance if a calling is identified to do this.

Educational disparities and access to quality education

The lack of quality education and limited access impede development and well-being by stifling critical leadership skills, reducing opportunities for marginalised groups, and creating a resource shortage. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." We believe that the church has a vital role to play in this regard.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Invest in education:* Improve infrastructure and teacher training. There is a huge need for a biblical worldview in Africa.
- *Build schools:* Train the body of Christ in the importance of stewarding them well for the generations that follow.
- *Curriculum integration:* Include biblical leadership training in educational programmes to develop Christ-like character in people.

Economic inequality and poverty

Widespread poverty limits opportunities and resources, holding people back. Economic constraints limit access to development opportunities, economic disparities favour the elite, and poverty prioritises survival over sustainable growth.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Economic empowerment:* Create or support initiatives that provide entrepreneurial growth opportunities. The Bible has a lot to say on the subject of business and finance. Africa has an abundance of small-scale entrepreneurs and with good training and access to finance, there are endless opportunities to grow God's kingdom.

- *Discipling the marketplace:* Many marketplace ministries (such as Ziواني) provide access to high-quality, biblically aligned resources that are practically relevant to doing kingdom business on the African continent.
- *Grassroots initiatives:* Invest in local leadership programmes. Train pastors to understand how to support their local entrepreneurs and to initiate small-scale agriculture and business.

Youth development

High youth disengagement and unemployment prevents skill acquisition and leadership development. The lack of employment opportunities hinders practical leadership growth experience and creates a generational gap, where the failure to engage youth can create a disconnect between church leadership and younger generations.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Job creation:* Innovative initiatives or incubators to create youth employment.
- *Skills training:* Offer targeted leadership and entrepreneurial skills programmes.
- *Youth leadership development:* Create a development plan for young people to grow in wisdom and in uplifting their communities.

Leadership integrity and accountability

Instances of corruption and lack of accountability among church leaders can undermine the church's credibility and moral authority. Corruption scandals erode trust within congregations, lack of transparency leads to misuse of resources, and ethical lapses among leaders can cause a moral crisis within the church community.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Biblical ethics:* Teach integrity, stewardship and accountability for leaders.
- *Transparent governance:* Implement transparent governance structures within churches and ministries.
- *Moral accountability:* Establish systems to ensure leaders uphold biblical moral standards.

CONCLUSION

Tackling these challenges requires a concerted effort from all sectors to foster leaders who can address Africa's unique issues and drive sustainable development.

2

Understanding African worldviews

2

Understanding African worldviews

2.1 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

In anthropology, a 'worldview' is often defined as a people's way of understanding and interpreting the world around them. It encompasses their beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. Worldviews provide a framework for understanding reality and guide individuals' and communities' decision-making processes. The traditional African worldview has often presented obstacles to the internalisation of the gospel and practices among many African Christians. This means we need a discerning application of the discipleship mandate, "to make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28).

There have been many accounts of how early missionaries to Africa did not always consider the traditional African worldview and its impact on the discipleship process. In his book *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), John Mbiti observes that African Christians often maintain a "dual religious system" in which they embrace Christianity while still holding onto traditional beliefs and practices which often leads to internal conflicts and tensions. Another example is theologian B.J. van der Walt who has written various critiques of the approach taken by many early missionaries in Africa, highlighting their failure to adequately understand and engage with the traditional African worldview. In his view, it was this failure that led to a Christianity that was perceived as alien and irrelevant to the lives of Africans.

Understanding the core principles of African worldviews is therefore essential for avoiding misunderstandings, building trust, and developing effective partnerships. It allows for a more nuanced and respectful approach to gospel engagement, recognising the diversity and complexity of African cultures. Importantly, working effectively within a region's worldview can be the difference between success and failure in implementing projects and kingdom initiatives.

2.1.1 African traditional religion

Most African societies are religiously pluralistic, and some are in a grip of a resurgence of African traditional religion. We use the word 'religion,' well aware of the fact that Africans are not a homogeneous group. The continent boasts one of the greatest ethnic diversity on the planet with thousands of different tribes and dialects.

Also, as Nigerian-born American professor, writer, and scholar of religious studies Jacob Olupona points out, even using the word 'religion' is problematic for many Africans, "because it suggests that religion is separate from the other aspects of one's culture, society, or environment.

But for many Africans, religion can never be separated from all these. It is a way of life, and it can never be separated from the public sphere. Religion informs everything in traditional African society, including politics, art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and death... African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane.”

Consequently, unlike most other religions, a person in Africa does not convert to African religion / spirituality. They are born into it. Hence, in Xhosa for example, when people speak of a belief system, they refer to *inkolo yakwantu* (religion of the people) – that is, the African people. African religion therefore caters only to the African people, and offers very little in terms of a moral standard that can be universalised.

Instead, it offers people what Tite Tiénou, Professor of theology of mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, refers to as “anthropocentric spirituality,” meaning that as a religion it considers man as the central fact, or final aim, of the universe. By extension, this means that for most followers of the African religion, God is not the centre of life. Rather, what lies at the centre is the idea of bending or manipulating the spiritual world for one’s benefit. In his book *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestors in a Changing Africa* (2007) Klaus Nürnberger argues the same: “...the supreme being in African religion is not known to have redemptive intentions for the world as a whole. The concerns of the people are usually concentrated on the needs of a specific community and dealt with as they come.”

“...unlike most other religions, a person in Africa does not convert to African religion / spirituality. They are born into it.”

Although African traditional religion fully embraces the idea of a supreme being, it believes that God lacks communicative competence and definite personality traits (more about this in the section below). In other words, God does not speak and He lacks a will of his own. Distorting God’s nature and stripping Him of his moral attributes is a key part of African traditional religion. As Nürnberger points out, “although the supreme being is called ‘creator’ in many African religions, he too does not seem to act. Again we are dealing with mythological personification, rather than the experience of an active person.” Thus, the idea of God is only abstract.

The gospel is distinctly different. It is culture-transcending – God is presented as the pre-eminent One who came and made His home among us (John. 1:14), to gather all nations and all people so that everyone will be gathered together to see His glory (Isaiah 66:19). The entire basis of Christianity is that of God’s self-communication in Christ and the Scriptures – without which God becomes a figment of our imagination.

The Bible demonstrates that all humans, without exception, are prevented from meeting God’s holy standard because of sin (Romans 3:23). And in fact, the gospel is the great equaliser because it shows people that their stand before God has nothing to do with the ethnic groups they belong to. It also forces people to give up the notion that their ethnicity or culture entitles them to an alternative worldview or moral system than what the Bible teaches.

Therefore, when someone in Africa says they believe in God, you must press them to explain what they mean. It could be that they mean they believe in the idea of a supreme being, and not the relational, communicative “Lord of all mankind” (Jeremiah 33:27 NIV) that Christians have come to know.

2.2 THREE KEY ATTRIBUTES OF THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

Africa has many ethnic groups, languages, religions, and cultures. No single definition can fully capture one 'African worldview' – however, there are some commonalities in many African cultures that may help us to see the broad differences between African worldviews and other regions of the world. We explore some of these below.

MAIN WORLDVIEW	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Western, Guilt / Innocence Worldview	Focus: Individualism, personal responsibility, and adherence to moral codes. Motivation: Avoiding guilt and seeking personal redemption. Justice: Based on established laws and individual rights. Shame: Primarily internalised and related to personal failure. Relationship with God: Often based on a legalistic framework and personal salvation.
Eastern, Honour / Shame Worldview	Focus: Collectivism, community honour, and social harmony. Motivation: Maintaining honour and avoiding shame for oneself and one's group. Justice: Based on restoring social balance and maintaining relationships. Shame: Externalised and related to public perception and social standing. Relationship with God: Emphasises communal rituals and upholding traditions.
African, Fear / Power Worldview	Focus: Collectivism in relation with spiritual forces, ancestral spirits, and maintaining balance with the supernatural. Motivation: Avoiding spiritual harm, appeasing spirits, and seeking blessings. Justice: Based on restoring spiritual harmony and respecting hierarchies. Shame: Related to disrupting communal harmony and disrespecting spiritual powers. Relationship with God: Emphasises rituals, offerings, and seeking protection from spiritual forces.

MAIN COMPARISON POINTS WITH OTHER WORLDVIEWS



1

Strong sense of community

2

Belief in hierarchies of power

3

A holistic yet fatalistic view of life

African

Fear / Power Worldview

Western

Guilt / Innocence Worldview

Eastern

Honour / Shame Worldview

2.2.1 Strong sense of community

One of the great African gifts to the world is its strong sense of community (collectivism). For the traditional African, it is essential to cultivate and maintain relational harmony within the community. This is exemplified by the concept of *ubuntu*, which John Mbiti explains as follows: “The individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole.”

In the traditional African worldview, the community’s well-being often precedes individual interests. This has implications for many aspects of African life:

- *Social interactions*: The goal is to maintain and respect social hierarchies.
- *Dealing with conflict*: Rwanda’s Gacaca courts, for example, were an effective community-based conflict resolution and collective healing process.
- *Decision-making*: Collective decision-making involves consulting with community members and seeking consensus, for example the Lekgotla in Botswana.
- *Economic systems*: Sharing and reciprocity are prized above individual wealth accumulation.
- *Religious practices*: These are communal in nature and reinforce social bonds and collective identity. It’s not uncommon to hear people who participate or contribute to a local church say they do so to ensure they are counted as part of a community and will one day be buried in dignity, simply because African traditional religion is meant to connect one to the community.

Another aspect that reinforces a strong sense of community among African people, is their oral tradition and storytelling. In the African context, orality is not just a communication style but an ingrained cultural and social way of life. (Orality refers to the reliance on spoken words to pass on knowledge and beliefs over many generations, and is a rich form of cultural expression that includes rituals, storytelling and performance art.) This shared experience serves as the primary mode of learning, teaching, and the preserving of traditions – often evoking deep emotions and creating a sense of connection among the people in the community.

2.2.2 Belief in hierarchies of power

A fundamental aspect of many African worldviews is the belief in a hierarchical structure of existence, encompassing both the spiritual and physical realms. At the pinnacle of this hierarchy resides a supreme being, the creator of the universe and the wellspring of all power. Across the continent, diverse communities have unique names for the supreme being, each reflecting their distinct understanding of the divine.





In Botswana, God is revered as *Ramasedi*, 'the father of lights,' illuminating the path for humanity. Among the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria, the supreme being is known as *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, 'the big God' or 'the God who creates,' emphasising the divine attributes of omnipotence and creativity. The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria worship *Olodumare*, the Almighty, the ultimate source of existence. In Ghana, the Akan people revere *Onyame*, the supreme sky god, while the Ga people call upon *Ataa Naa Nyongmo*, the ancient one, the creator of all things.

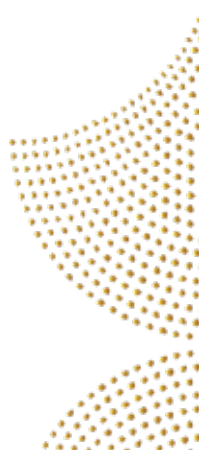
Among the living, societal hierarchies are based on age, gender, social status, and spiritual knowledge. Elders, chiefs, and spiritual leaders hold positions of authority and are respected for their wisdom and guidance. Spiritual leaders, in particular, are believed to possess the ability to communicate with the supernatural realm and intercede on behalf of the community. These hierarchies bind and hold the community together, creating a sense of order and interconnectedness. Deviation from this established system can lead to rejection, criticism, and isolation, as it is seen as a disruption of the social fabric and a potential invitation of misfortune. For many traditional Africans, maintaining these ties is not merely a matter of cultural preservation, but a means of ensuring spiritual and communal well-being.

This interplay of beliefs and social structures is often rooted in a power-fear worldview, where actions are motivated by fear of spiritual consequences. The desire to appease powerful entities presents a unique challenge and opportunity for those engaged in evangelism and discipleship among traditional African communities.

It is therefore helpful that this theme of power hierarchies among patriarchs and their communities is also present in the Bible. The concepts of respect, honour and collectivism are abundant throughout the Old Testament. When Western thinkers bring the gospel in Africa, they would do well to highlight these clear biblical references, connecting them firstly into the African worldview, and showing how the gospel enhances, rather than destroys, these ways of life.

While the traditional African worldview acknowledges the existence of a supreme God, this deity is often perceived as distant and inaccessible. To bridge the gap between the human and divine realms, intermediaries such as ancestors and spirits play a crucial role. 'Ancestors' hold a significant position in the hierarchy, acting as mediums between the living and the spiritual world. They are revered for their guidance and protection, and their blessings are sought for various aspects of life.

Nürnberg, however, questions if the idea of a 'mediator' is an original one, or is a result of Christian and Muslim influences. He argues, "Ancestors are not normally requested to carry the sacrifices, prayers and petitions of their offspring upwards to higher ancestral authorities, and finally to the supreme being. Nor do ancestors speak in the name of the supreme being when they make their intention or their displeasure known. In practical terms, they are themselves the authorities with whom one relates, the original authors of the message, blessings, and punishments, and final recipients of gifts and prayers."



The African traditional worldview places less emphasis on relating with God, and more on a mechanistic understanding of spirituality. Basically, if the right spiritual parameters are in place, you will get the desired outcome. If someone dies or a misfortune befalls the family it is caused by a curse, witchcraft or because something has displeased the ancestral spirits. If the right steps are taken and the right charms are used or the right prescriptions from the *shaman* followed, the problem will be solved.

In addition, spirits of nature, animals, or other entities are also believed to possess power and influence. They can be benevolent or malevolent, and rituals and offerings are often made to appease them and seek their favour. In some African traditions, there are specific divinities associated with various aspects of life, such as agriculture, fertility, or healing. These divine beings are often worshipped and revered for their powers.

2.2.3 A holistic and yet fatalistic view of life

In most African cultures, life isn't divided into two separate boxes of 'sacred' and 'secular,' as is often found in Western cultures. Instead, everything is linked, and spirituality is woven into every part of life like a spider's web – if you touch one part, the whole web vibrates. This means that the spirit world isn't far off and separate but part of everyday life. Rituals, ceremonies, and even daily tasks have spiritual meaning.

People try to live in harmony with the world around them, especially the spirit world. Unfortunately, this way of seeing all as connected also tends to give birth to mysticism or animism, where the spiritual and physical worlds overlap. People might believe that certain actions or words can bring about positive or negative consequences from the spirit world. Certain events in nature, such as the appearance of certain animals or weather patterns, might be interpreted as messages from the spirit world.

“...if someone has internalised the gospel, they burn their charms – many see this as powerful as baptism.”

Christians believe that it is sin that separates people from God (Isaiah 59:1–2). In contrast, in the African worldview sin is not a direct offence against God, or a transgression of some moral law or virtue, but a breakdown of the complex structure of human relationships within the community, including the ancestors. For this reason, many Africans are raised to fear everything else – except God. They are taught to relate to nebulous spirits, without ever hearing anything about the Holy Spirit. Tiénou elaborates, “Since evil forces, visible and invisible, destroy life, people need to find ways to protect themselves and maximise life. This seems to be one of the foundational principles undergirding African religious practices. It provides the basis for understanding the purpose of religion as the prevention of misfortune and the maximisation of fortune.”

Many therefore wear or carry objects believed to have magical powers to ward off evil spirits or bring good luck. For example, in the western parts of Zambia along the Zambezi flood plains, many of the villagers wear charms. One of the signs that someone has internalised the gospel is when they decide to burn their charms – missionaries and church leaders see this as powerful as baptism because for someone from a power-fear context, to take off their charms and burn them means something significant has shifted in their hearts.

Unfortunately, this emphasis on ‘everything being connected’ often leads to fatalism – because, on the one hand, a person is seen simply as an extension of their ancestral hierarchy, and on the other, everything that ‘goes wrong’ is blamed on some invisible, detrimental force. As Janet Hobson put in her book *The God of the Xhosa*, “The Golden Age is always in the past, and conservatism is highly valued. Wisdom is a knowledge of the tradition and custom related to the past.” Hence, in the afterlife, there is nothing to look forward to except becoming an ancestor – so for many people in Africa, the past is the future, and there is a limited emphasis on forward planning. Predictably, this removes agency from people to take responsibility for their own lives.

Some even view time itself as cyclical, reflecting the natural rhythms of life, unlike the linear progression from past to future in Western views. For example, the Akan people of Ghana completely integrate this cyclical worldview into their cultural and spiritual practices. Their concept of time, known as *nkra-bea*, is not a linear progression, but a repeating cycle of events and experiences. The Adinkra symbol *Sankofa*, is a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face forward, representing the importance of learning from the past to inform the present and future.

This cyclical view emphasises the interconnectedness of past, present, and future – again reinforcing the sacred significance of the past and ancestors remaining active participants in the lives of the living. History is not just a record but a living experience that repeats itself, fostering respect for tradition and the wisdom of elders.

A cyclical view of time reinforces existing social hierarchies and power structures, as those who hold knowledge of past cycles may be seen as having greater authority and influence. Again, this can lead to a fatalistic attitude, where individuals and communities believe that their circumstances are destined to repeat, regardless of their actions. This results in a sense of powerlessness or resignation, making it challenging to motivate people to take proactive steps toward change or improvement in their lives or communities.



2.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION WORK

These three key themes incorporated into traditional African worldviews have profound implications for mission approaches in Africa. Understanding and respecting these deep-rooted themes is essential for building bridges and effective discipleship. It is only through such sensitivity and cultural awareness that the gospel can be effectively communicated in a way that resonates with African worldviews.

Use community-centric strategies

Overcoming the obstacles to the internalisation of the gospel among many African Christians requires a shift away from Western individualistic to community-centric strategies. Perhaps rather than focussing on individual conversions and discipleship, we need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of African communities and strive to engage with them as a whole. This involves building relationships with community leaders, elders, and traditional influencers who can facilitate broader access and acceptance.

Emphasise the cosmic harmony of the gospel

While some traditional African beliefs might be completely antithetical to Christian ones, the Christian message of forgiveness and making things right with God fits really well with the African desire for harmony. The story of Jesus becomes a story of restoring balance not just with God, but with everything in creation, as written in Colossians 1:20, “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Present the gospel in power

Present the gospel in its power! Dr Harvey Kwiyani is adamant: “In African traditional religion, a God who does not heal or provide is useless and will have no followers. Why would one follow a God who cannot protect people from the evil forces? The God of Israel that we see in the Bible is *Jehovah-Jireh* (the God who provides), *Jehovah-Rapha* (the God who heals or restores) and *Jehovah-Sabaoth* (the God of Armies) because, of course, God must help humans in this life and not only after death. A God whose only promise to humans is eternal life in heaven does not make sense in Africa.”

An effective gospel presentation and discipleship in a power-fear worldview might look like this:

- *Acknowledge and validate fears:* Begin by recognising and respecting the fears and concerns many in a power-fear worldview might have. Listen with love to their experiences with spiritual forces and acknowledge the reality of their struggles.

- *Emphasise God's supreme power:* Present God as the ultimate source of power, far surpassing any other spiritual entity. Highlight the biblical accounts of God's power over nature, demons, and evil forces. Share the message of Jesus Christ as the victor over evil and the provider of spiritual protection.
- *Highlight spiritual warfare:* Teach believers about spiritual warfare and how Christ has already won the battle against evil. Teach them to put on the armour of God (Ephesians 6:10–18) for protection and victory. If they fear ancestral spirits, teach them how Christ's sacrifice breaks the power of curses and brings reconciliation.
- *Share testimonies of God's love and grace:* While acknowledging the reality of spiritual forces, teach that God's love and grace are greater than any fear. The sharing of relatable testimonies of individuals who have experienced deliverance from fear and oppression through faith in Christ is a powerful tool.

Embrace oral communication

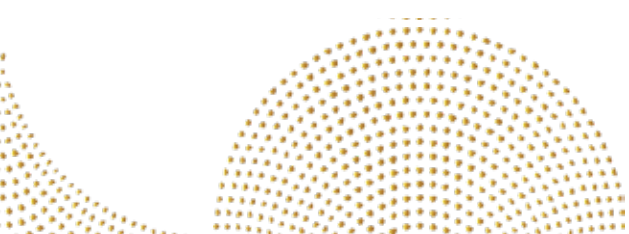
Given the prevalence of oral learners and the cultural significance of orality, traditional literate methods of teaching and evangelism is not as effective as in Western contexts. Even many Africans who have been educated in the written English language connect with their cultural heritage through orality. In addition, written materials and technology may not be readily available or accessible to everyone in Africa, especially in rural areas.

Thus, oral communication remains the most reliable and inclusive way to reach a wide audience, and even as literacy rates increase in Africa, orality will continue to play a vital role in learning and communication. Christian organisations that have adapted to this challenge include Stations of Generosity, which uses symbols and repetition to make their teaching memorable and easy to understand, and the DMM Platform, a media app that uses pictures and stories to support disciple-making movements.

CONCLUSION

Understanding (and being willing to honestly engage with) traditional African worldviews across the continent is fundamental for meaningful and effective mission work on the continent. The common themes of a having strong sense of community, believing in hierarchies of power, and subscribing to a holistic approach to life that can ironically stimulate individual fatalism – these are all deeply embedded in African perspective on life, love, and everything in between. Yet with a commitment to honour both the gospel and the cultural depth of African societies, we can completely change the missional landscape of Africa.

We thank Africa Mhlope for his meaningful contribution to this section on understanding African worldviews.

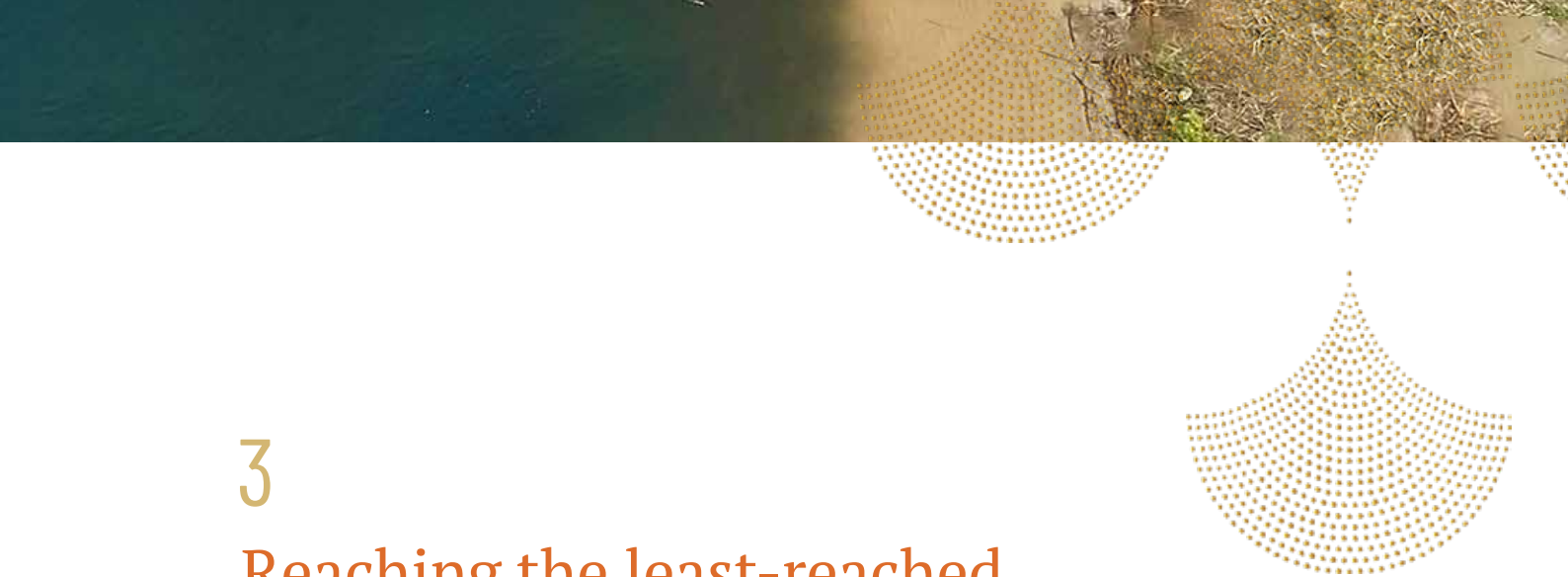




3

Reaching the least-reached





3

Reaching the least-reached

3.1 STRATEGIC MISSIONAL REGIONS

There are around 972 unreached people groups in Africa, representing more than 420 million people. Yet the church on the continent is larger than in any other place in the world – Africa is also home to over 631 million Christians, and this number is projected to grow to [1.1 billion by 2050](#). It is time to bridge the gap between the vast Christian community and the unreached people groups by effectively mobilising local congregations, church networks, and the broader Christian community to extend the gospel to the most remote and resistant areas.

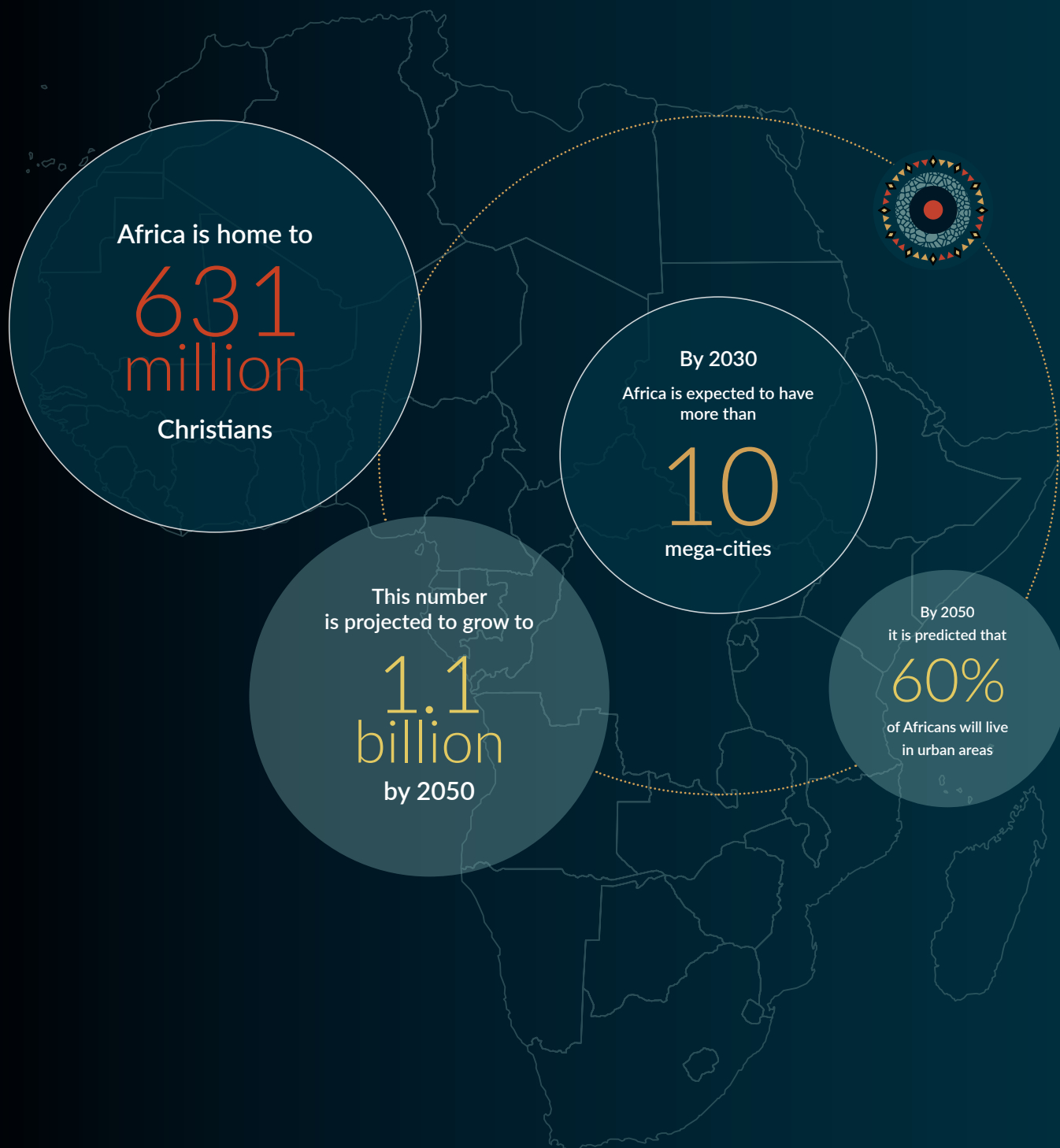
Unreached people groups (UPGs) refer to ethnic groups with less than 2% of its population identified as evangelical Christians and without a sufficient indigenous community of believers capable of evangelising the group without outside assistance. Unreached, unengaged people groups (UUPGs) refer to ethnic groups with no known church planting efforts underway and no active engagement by a mission organisation to reach them. These groups often have no access to the gospel in their own language or cultural context.

Africa has the fastest urban growth rate in the world, with the urban population expected to triple over the next 40 years. By 2030, Africa is expected to have more than 10 mega-cities (cities with populations exceeding 10 million), and by 2050, it is predicted that 60% of Africans will live in urban areas. Of course, this presents a huge opportunity to reach people with the gospel who were previously very hard to reach in their communities of origin. Mobilising the body of Christ for effective urban mission has become an important strategic task and one that has few success stories.

When we think of this vast continent through the lens of unreached peoples, it is helpful to consider regions that have similar cultural and spiritual strongholds against the gospel and to mobilise accordingly. We highlight three key regions: Sahel / West Africa, Swahili coast / Madagascar, and the Horn of Africa.

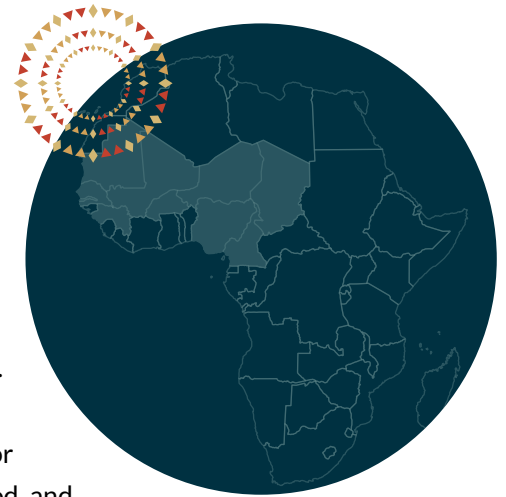
Africa

STRATEGIC STATISTICS



3.1.1 Sahel / West Africa

The political region of the Sahel covers 10 countries: Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria. The Sahel itself is a bio-geographical region that is the transition zone between the more humid Sudanese savannas to its south and the drier Sahara to the north. It is also the tension-belt between the mainly Muslim north and mainly Christian south. A large part of this region is unreachable for numerous reasons – lack of roads and infrastructure, unusual food, and poor living conditions. Foreigners are often shunned, and people protect their communities from outside influence due to suspicion.



“In 2022, the Sahel accounted for 43% of global terrorism deaths.”

Active Islam has a history of using destructive force to subjugate communities and to break down any resistance. For example, since the year 2000, roughly [62,000 Christians in Nigeria](#) have been murdered by Islamist jihadist groups including Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Fulani militias. This is one of the most difficult regions in the world to live as a Christian.

Passive Islam is also a factor to be considered. In these environments being Muslim is more a group identity than a religion. This places a barrier to anyone who would like to ‘convert’ people from Islam to Christianity. Cultural intelligence plays an important role in working effectively here where church planters need to be patient with culture transformation.

In West Africa spiritual activity is very high, including occult practices. Voodoo is still active in countries like Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Animals like birds, dogs, cats, goats, rams, and bulls are commonly used for sacrifice. Therefore all church-planting activity needs to be prayer-first, working from intercession towards spiritual warfare before church planters move in to engage communities.

But perhaps one of the most potent factors in the Sahel region that prevents effective missional outreach, is terrorism. Terrorism thrives in countries with poor ecologies (the relationships among humans and with their physical environment, on the individual, population, community, ecosystem, and biosphere levels) – therefore it has a significant (and expanding!) footprint in the region.

For example, according to the Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel is home to the world’s fastest growing and most-deadly terrorist groups, with the Islamic State (IS) replacing the Taliban as the world’s deadliest terror group in 2021. In 2022, the IS and its affiliates planned and executed deadly attacks in 21 countries, and that year the Sahel accounted for 43% of global terrorism deaths. As mentioned in the Wilson Center’s Africa: Year in Review 2023, “A larger share of the world’s terrorism-related deaths come from Africa’s Sahel region than South Asia and MENA combined. And with 1,135 terrorism deaths in 2022, Burkina Faso now accounts for more terrorism deaths annually than any other country.”

By 2024, the epicentre of terrorism has shifted out of the Middle East and into the central Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, which now accounts for over 50% of global terrorism deaths. Burkina Faso has suffered the worst impact, with deaths increasing by 68% despite attacks decreasing by 17% (meaning that attacks have become more sophisticated and deadly).

Many evangelistic crusades have taken place in West Africa’s cities. Much of this effort has been opposed by communities as they are perceived as one religion trying to supersede another (especially Islam). Effective techniques have been disciple-making movements where church planters take a slower, deeper approach to show incarnational ministry and how the gospel impacts the very fabric of society.

The table below provides a high-level overview of the key unreached people groups in the Sahel region.

KEY UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS IN THE SAHEL REGION	
Fulani (Fulbe / Peul) People	Population: Over 40 million across several countries in West Africa. Countries: Found primarily in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Religion: Predominantly Muslim, with strong adherence to Islamic practices. Influence: The Fulani are one of the most widespread and influential ethnic groups in West Africa, playing key roles in trade, politics, and the spread of Islam throughout the region. Their nomadic nature makes them difficult to reach, but they are crucial to any mission strategy in the Sahel.
Tuareg People	Population: Approximately 2–3 million. Countries: Mainly in Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Burkina Faso. Religion: Devout Muslims with a history of resistance to outside influences, including Christianity. Influence: The Tuareg are historically nomadic desert dwellers and have significant influence in the northern parts of the Sahel. Their control over key trans-Saharan trade routes has made them important players in the region’s history and economy.
Kanuri People	Population: Around 10 million. Countries: Predominantly in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Religion: Almost exclusively Muslim, with strong Islamic cultural traditions. Influence: The Kanuri are influential in the Lake Chad Basin and are linked to the historical Kanem-Bornu Empire. They are significant in both regional trade and politics, particularly in northeastern Nigeria and southeastern Niger.



Songhai People

Population: About 3–4 million.

Countries: Primarily found in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Religion: Almost entirely Muslim, with Islam deeply integrated into their culture and way of life.

Influence: The Songhai are descendants of the once-powerful Songhai Empire, which dominated much of West Africa in the medieval period. Today, they remain influential in the region, especially along the Niger River in Mali.

Hausa People

Population: Over 60 million (though many Hausa are reached, some subgroups remain unreached).

Countries: Predominantly in Nigeria and Niger, with smaller communities in Chad, Cameroon, and Sudan.

Religion: Muslim, with Islam being a central part of their identity and culture.

Influence: The Hausa are one of the most influential ethnic groups in West Africa, playing a dominant role in commerce, culture, and politics. While there are Christian Hausa communities, many rural and isolated groups remain unreached.

Toubou (Teda / Daza) People

Population: Around 1.5 million.

Countries: Mainly in Chad, Niger, and Libya.

Religion: Predominantly Muslim, with traditional practices blended into their Islamic faith.

Influence: The Toubou are influential in northern Chad and Niger and are known for their independence and resistance to outside influence, making them challenging to reach with the gospel.

Zarma (Djerma) People

Population: Around 4–5 million.

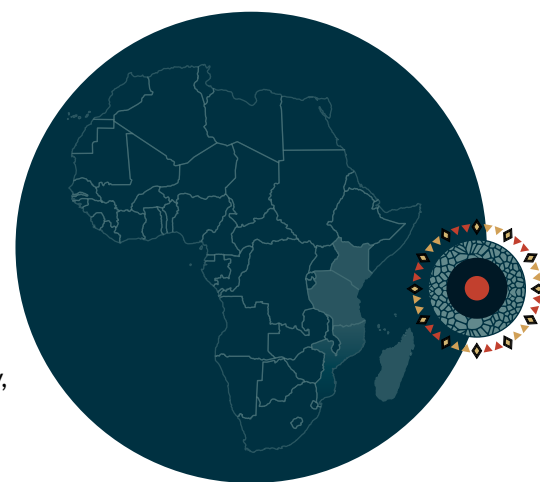
Countries: Primarily in Niger, with smaller populations in Mali and Nigeria.

Religion: Almost entirely Muslim, with Islam deeply ingrained in their culture.

Influence: The Zarma are closely related to the Songhai and play an important role in Niger's political and social landscape.

3.1.2 Swahili coast / Madagascar

Stretching along the coastal regions of Kenya, Tanzania, northern Mozambique, and the islands of Zanzibar and Comoros, the Swahili coast is primarily Islamic. Arab trade along the Swahili coast (especially Zanzibar) dates back to the early centuries before Christ, and shaped the region's culture, economy, and society.



Arab merchants, particularly from Oman and the Arabian Peninsula, were attracted by the coast's access to slavery and valuable goods like gold, ivory, and spices. Over time, these traders established settlements along the Swahili coast, blending with the local Bantu-speaking populations and creating a distinctive Swahili culture that fused African, Arab, and Islamic influences. Zanzibar became a key hub for this trade, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries when Omani Arabs controlled the island and used it as a base for their lucrative clove plantations and the slave trade. In 1840, the Omani capital moved from Muscat to Zanzibar City.

Arab influence extended inland through trade routes that connected the Swahili coast to the African interior, facilitating exchanges of goods and the spread of Islam. This presence of Islam presented challenges for Christian missions. Church planting efforts in Zanzibar, for example, have faced significant opposition due to the deeply entrenched Muslim identity across much of these coastal regions.

The Comoros is predominantly Muslim, with around 98% of the population being unreached. Islam was introduced in the early 16th century when Arab traders used the islands as trading posts with Africa and Madagascar. The Christian presence is minimal, and there are significant restrictions on religious freedom, making it one of the most challenging places for Christian missions. The country faces economic hardships with agriculture being its mainstay (accounting for about 50% of GDP), while foreign aid continues to be a big contributor to its economy.

Despite these challenges, there are glimmers of hope. A significant youth population (over 65% under 25 years) is active on social media platforms. This demographic presents an opportunity for innovative ministry approaches through creative media engagement. Additionally, there is a small emerging underground church that requires equipping and encouragement and has potential to be activated to engage the nation with the gospel.

Madagascar has traditionally posed challenges for church planting due to its unique cultural landscape. The ancestral religion of Madagascar, known as Malagasy traditional religion, is centred on the worship of a supreme creator, and the veneration of the spirits of ancestors. Ancestor worship is a central practice, with the dead believed to influence the living, providing guidance and protection. One of the most notable rituals is the *Famadihana* or 'turning of the bones,' where families exhume and rewrap their deceased relatives' remains – a practice deeply embedded in both culture and religion.

Amidst the difficulties, several indigenous and culturally attuned church planters are making strides in Madagascar. However, there remain approximately 10–15 unreached people groups on this large island. Most Christian evangelism is perceived as a threat to cultural identity, leading to resistance against adopting Christianity fully – often, it is integrated with traditional beliefs where ancestor worship continues alongside Christian practices.

The table below provides a high-level overview of the key unreached people groups in the Swahili coastal region.

KEY UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS IN THE SWAHILI COASTAL REGION

Swahili People

Population: Swahili people are spread across 25 countries in total, but mainly spread across Kenya, Tanzania, and northern Mozambique. Over 1.3 million people call themselves Swahili.

Religion: Many tribes make up the Swahili, most are exclusively Sunni Muslim. Some have some access to the gospel, but most do not.

Location: Primarily along the coastal regions of Kenya and Tanzania, as well as the Zanzibar archipelago.

Status: The Swahili people have a long history of Islamic influence dating back to the 7th century. Christianity has made little impact on Swahili society, particularly in Zanzibar, where the Muslim identity is deeply ingrained.

Digo People

Population: Approximately 700,000.

Religion: Predominantly Sunni Muslim.

Location: Southern coastal Kenya and northern Tanzania.

Status: The Digo are part of the larger Mijikenda group but stand out as being heavily influenced by Islam. Christian engagement is minimal, and the majority of the population remains unreached.

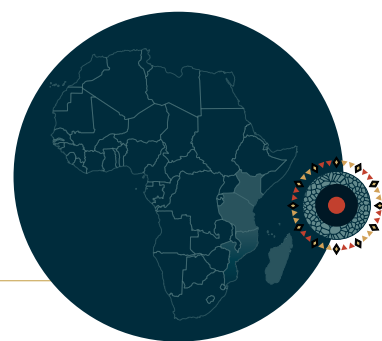
Yao People

Population: Around 2 million.

Religion: Predominantly Muslim (over 95%).

Location: Southern Tanzania, northern Mozambique, and parts of Malawi.

Status: The Yao have been Muslim since the 19th century due to their involvement in the Indian Ocean slave trade. They are largely unreached by the gospel, especially in rural areas where Islam and traditional beliefs dominate.



Makua People

Population: Approximately 5 million.

Religion: Primarily a mix of Islam and traditional beliefs.

Location: Northern Mozambique.

Status: While some Makua groups have been reached by Christian missionaries, large segments remain unreached, particularly in the northern coastal regions where Islamic influence is strong.

Zaramo People

Population: Approximately 1 million.

Religion: Primarily a mix of Islam and traditional beliefs.

Location: Southern Tanzania, mostly on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam.

Status: Historically, the Zaramo were involved in the slave trade, capturing individuals from other tribes for sale. Currently they are one of the marginalised groups in Tanzania, facing significant challenges such as low levels of formal education and limited access to economic opportunities.

Zigua People

Population: About 900,000.

Religion: Primarily a mix of traditional beliefs and Islam, with some practising divination.

Location: Northeastern Tanzania.

Status: One of the marginalised groups in Tanzania, facing significant challenges such as low levels of formal education and limited access to economic opportunities.

Comorian People

Population: About 850,000.

Religion: Over 99% Sunni Muslim.

Location: Comoros Islands, located between the coast of Mozambique and Madagascar.

Status: The Comorian people are almost entirely unreached, with strict Islamic adherence and limited Christian presence. Evangelism is challenging due to government restrictions and social pressures against conversion.

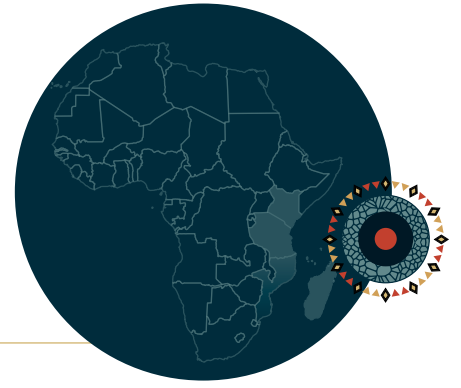
Shirazi People

Population: Around 500,000.

Religion: Predominantly Muslim.

Location: Coastal regions of Tanzania and Kenya, particularly on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba.

Status: The Shirazi are considered one of the original Swahili groups with deep Persian and Arab roots. They are strongly resistant to the gospel, and missionary work among them has seen little success.



Mwani People

Population: Approximately 120,000.

Religion: Almost entirely Muslim.

Location: Northern Mozambique.

Status: The Mwani live along the northern coast of Mozambique and are deeply entrenched in Islamic practices. They remain unreached with very little exposure to Christianity.

Hadimu People

Population: Around 300,000.

Religion: Sunni Muslim.

Location: Zanzibar (especially Pemba Island).

Status: Like the Swahili and Shirazi, the Hadimu are predominantly Muslim and remain largely unreached. Islam is integral to their cultural identity.

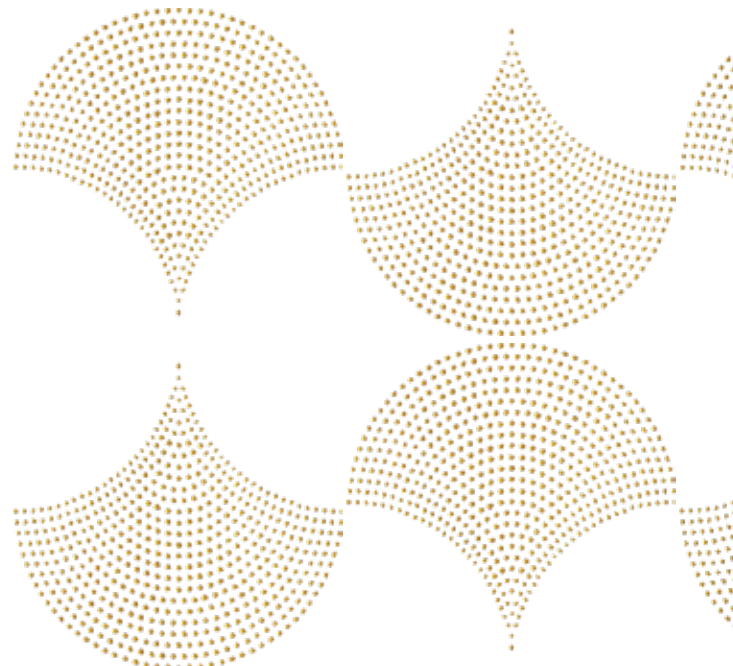
Ngindo People

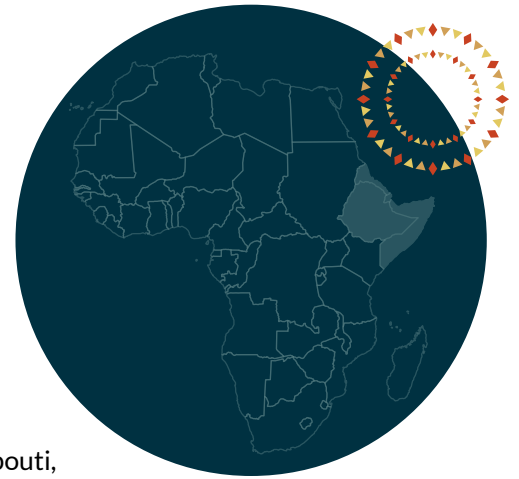
Population: Around 250,000.

Religion: Predominantly Muslim, with elements of traditional beliefs.

Location: Southern Tanzania, along the Rufiji River Delta and coastal regions.

Status: The Ngindo people are unreached, with the majority adhering to Islam mixed with animistic practices.





3.1.3 The Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa, comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, is a region marked by complex religious dynamics, where Muslim-Christian tensions have been prevalent for centuries. This religious divide has often contributed to social and political tensions, and made worse by ethnic conflicts, regional instability, and struggles for power. (Yemen, a short trip across the Red Sea, shares maritime borders with Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti.)

Ethiopia is predominantly Christian (about 63%), with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church playing a dominant historical role. Evangelical and Pentecostal populations are also growing, particularly in the southern and western parts of the country. About 34% of the population is Muslim, mostly concentrated in the eastern and southern regions.

Somalia is 99% Sunni Muslim. The country has little Christian presence due to the strict enforcement of Islamic law (Sharia), and the fact that in some areas conversion to Christianity is illegal and punishable by death. The militant group Al-Shabaab, which controls parts of southern Somalia, specifically targets Christians, making it one of the most dangerous places for Christian missionaries.

Eritrea is divided almost equally between orthodox Christianity and Islam. The government tightly controls religious expression. The government (termed the North Korea of Africa) has been accused of severe persecution of evangelical Christians and other minority religious groups. Evangelicals, in particular, face imprisonment, torture, and forced labour. According to Open Doors, “anyone who follows Jesus outside of these denominations (such as Evangelicals or Pentecostals) is at constant risk. Speaking out about persecution or government interference in church matters is not tolerated at all. Raids to round up ‘unsanctioned’ believers are common, with church leaders particularly targeted. Those seized in these raids are often sent into Eritrea’s notorious prison network, where they can be detained indefinitely. Current estimates suggest around 1,000 Eritrean Christians are imprisoned.”

“Estimates suggest around 1,000 Eritrean Christians are imprisoned.”

The table below provides a high-level overview of the key unreached people groups in the Horn of Africa.

KEY UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Somali People

Population: Over 30 million across the Horn of Africa.

Religion: Predominantly Sunni Muslim.

Location: Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya.

Status: Almost entirely unreached with the gospel, with Christians making up less than 0.01%. There is extreme hostility toward Christianity, and conversion is dangerous.

Afar People

Population: Approximately 3–4 million.

Religion: Over 99% Muslim.

Location: Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti.

Status: The Afar are semi-nomadic and resistant to outside influence, including Christianity. They are deeply tied to Islam, and missionary work is very limited.

Beja People

Population: Around 2–3 million.

Religion: Almost entirely Muslim.

Location: Sudan, Eritrea and Egypt.

Status: This nomadic group is highly unreached, with minimal Christian influence due to their remote lifestyle and Islamic traditions.

Oromo People Cluster

Population: Around 45 million among 13 distinctive groups.

Religion: Mix of traditional beliefs and Islam. They believe in a supreme being (WAQ) and their supreme spiritual leader is known as the Fite Qalu.

Location: Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Status: Most unreached, some reached.

Harari People

Population: Approximately 200,000.

Religion: Over 99% Muslim.

Location: Ethiopia.

Status: The Harari are a small but historically influential Muslim group in eastern Ethiopia. Christian presence is almost non-existent.



*There is no argument in Christian circles
that the growth of the church today is in
the southern hemisphere and the money of
the church is in the northern hemisphere.
That provides a perfect storm of dependency
relationships.*

3.2 CHANGING THE MISSIONAL LANDSCAPE IN AFRICA

We are the best trained, most generously resourced and digitally active generation of people with a heart for achieving the Great Commission ever, in history. Yet despite the calls for polycentric leadership, the careful elevation of women's participation, and increased calls for collaboration, the statistics tell the tale – Christianity globally is not outgrowing the population growth rate.

We must face the painful reality that traditional approaches to missions are no longer sufficient to keep up with the pace of global changes. Africa, however, remains the exception to the rule and therein lies our huge opportunity.

Because of his track record of mentoring fruitful church planters in Africa over many years, we asked Roy Moran, chairman of disciple-making movement New Generations, for his (Western) perspective on thinking differently about the task.

"There is no argument in Christian circles that the growth of the church today is in the southern hemisphere and the money of the church is in the northern hemisphere. That provides a perfect storm of dependency relationships. Money in the North, ministry in South – the 'haves' versus 'have nots.' So it stands to reason that we export capital from North to South. That is God's heart, isn't it, that every tribe and tongue will be taught obedience to the teachings of Jesus, and it takes money to get that done?

Yet our exports have been largely cross-cultural workers whose numbers are decreasing, and their return on investment has been questioned due to the amount of money and the length of time it takes to achieve results. And direct funding of indigenous ministries has had its own issues.

But what if we change the framework through which we approach UPG-ministry?

We often draw on a biological metaphor for our work. We might, however, use a more effective viral metaphor. Whereas the biological lens includes a sense of time to develop and reproduce, through a viral lens all you need is proximity (close enough), potency (strong enough) and duration (long enough) for the virus to transfer from one person to another.

We've all heard the missiological adage, "it cannot happen without you, but it must not depend on you." Does our gospel methodology have a 'without you' component? As Harry Brown, CEO of New Generations often says, "If you can't have a 'without you' conversation, you aren't having a Great Commission conversation."

It might seem like a stretch, but perhaps the biological mindset is why we often funnel money through Western organisations instead of giving directly to indigenous ministries. We aren't adept at a 'without you' conversation because of our biological mindset, therefore we are more comfortable in dependent relationships. Yet many indigenous organisations (if given the chance to develop an adult-to-adult relationship with Western money) would produce amazing return on investment for the Great Commission.

Co-creating the kingdom of God in this world is the reason we are here. There is nothing more important nor as dear to our Father's heart than finding his lost children. In light of that we ought to ruthlessly examine where we are, why we aren't further along, and what is keeping us from being more effective for our King and his kingdom. And leave no stone unturned in that process – even our methodologies.”

Roy's sentiments highlight how important it is to reconsider how we do missions, and especially how we work collaboratively across continents. That aside, here are a few strategies that remain important in how the body of Christ can transform culture and reach the unreached in Africa more effectively:

Educating church leaders

The most obvious approach is to start with the organisation in Africa with the widest reach – the church itself. In many cases, churches are not aware of the state of unreached people groups in Africa, nor of the need for obedience to the Great Commission. We must also address the 'rent-seeking' nature of many pastors who only focus on local congregations for what they can give financially. There is therefore a need for educating local church leaders about the importance of having a missional mindset, and then sharing practical knowledge on how to reach out to those who have never encountered the gospel.

Developing local leadership

Training and empowering local leaders for missions is crucial, especially since near-culture or same-culture leaders understand the cultural nuances and language of their communities, making them effective in evangelism and discipleship. Historic mission strategies prioritised Westerners going to new frontiers for missions. Although this is still an option, often outsiders are better utilised as mobilisers and trainers for local missionaries. Without doubt, Africans reaching Africans have the greatest impact on missions on the continent, while Westerners play key mobilisation roles.





Strategic church-planting

A proven strategy for wider impact is to plant hubs in strategic locations. These hubs, led by African leaders, can then become bases for training, vision-casting, and raising up a new generation of leaders who go to the unreached with the gospel. A focus on church multiplication ensures that new believers are discipled and that new churches continue to plant more churches, creating a sustainable model of growth.

Contextualising the gospel

Presenting the gospel in a way that resonates with the local culture is essential. This includes using local languages where possible, incorporating indigenous music and art forms, addressing cultural barriers to the gospel, and mobilising resources for the sake of those who do not yet have access to the Bible in their own language.

This is one area where a lot has been achieved, including: contextualised Bible translations like the African Study Bible that make the message of Christ more accessible and relatable, the Swahili version of the popular Alpha film series, One Hope's Bible engagement programmes that specifically focusses on reaching children and youth, and ecosystem organisations such as LuminAfrica that focus on enhancing collaboration among different Bible translation efforts.

Serving practical needs

Holistic ministry approaches, such as providing medical care, clean water, education, and agricultural development, demonstrate the love of Christ in practical ways and create real opportunities for evangelisation. Although there are some wonderful churches doing this, they are by far the exception rather than the rule. Africa is a greenfield for the church to reach out to the felt needs of society, and partnerships with ministries such as Farming God's Way, Foundations for Farming, or A Rocha can enhance the church's capacity to meet these needs.

Engaging displaced peoples and refugees

Africa has much people movement due to war and poverty. As a result, there are multiple opportunities for the church to actively engage displaced people groups by bringing hope – for example, through the drilling of water wells, providing healthcare, or education. Through these efforts, the church can naturally move into disciple-making, trauma healing and assimilating people into supportive faith communities.

Prayer and spiritual warfare

Mobilising prayer networks to intercede for UPGs is vital because prayer breaks down spiritual strongholds and prepares people's hearts to receive the gospel. Prayer and spiritual warfare also come naturally to Africans. Therefore, directing prayer efforts towards the unreached presents an incredible opportunity to encourage spiritual growth in local Christians as well as the expansion of the kingdom.

Use technology and media

Africa has high rates of mobile phone usage, and at the moment, Christian ministries are not using the full potential these channels provide to reach communities. Much more can be done to reach the unreached by leveraging radio broadcasts, social media, and mobile apps – especially in remote and restricted areas where traditional methods are not feasible.

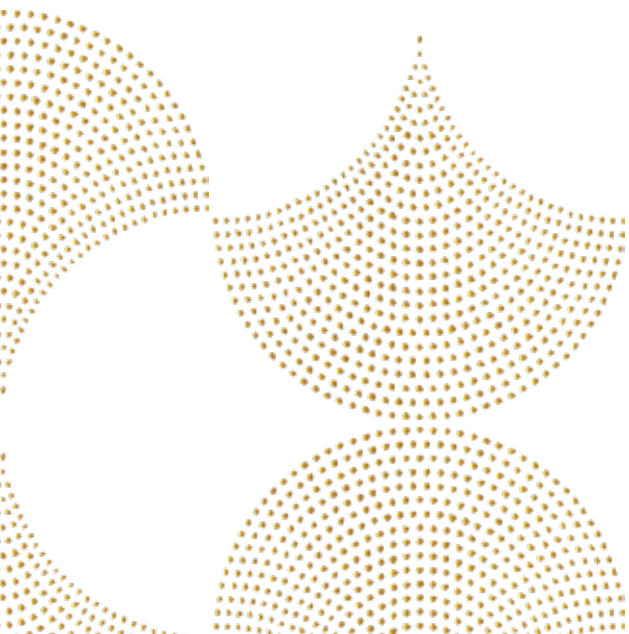
Create culturally relevant Christian media

There is a need to produce culturally relevant Christian media content and strategically target specific communities with the gospel and discipleship material. Africa is rich in diverse languages, traditions, and worldviews, and a one-size-fits-all approach to gospel communication often falls short. To truly resonate with communities, Christian content must align with local contexts, incorporating stories, proverbs, music, and visuals that reflect the unique cultural identities of the people it seeks to engage.

CONCLUSION

The task of reaching Africa's unreached and unengaged is monumental – but essential. By understanding the unique challenges and opportunities in each region, churches and mission organisations can effectively strategise and mobilise to bring the gospel to those who have yet to hear it. The strategic role of the church in Africa cannot be overstated.

Through indigenous leadership development, strategic church planting, contextualised ministry, holistic approaches, prayer, and technology, we can advance the kingdom of God across the continent. With prayer, dedication, and strategic action, we can see the Great Commission fulfilled in Africa, bringing the light of Christ to every corner of this diverse and vibrant continent.



4

A continent in trauma



4

A continent in trauma

4.1 THE 'PAST IS NOT DEAD, IT'S NOT EVEN PAST'

Africa. The 'dark continent.'

This descriptive label of Africa was first used (at least in print form) in the late 19th century by the British explorer Henry Stanley, who appears to have penned it in reference to both the 'unexplored' and the 'dangerous' aspects of the continent – conjuring up images or feelings of foreboding. But for more than 100 years afterwards, it pegged Africa in the global consciousness as a place of savagery in need of rescuing.

Even as late as 2021, the economist Jeffrey Sachs echoed that sentiment at the UN Food Systems Pre-Summit when he said about the DRC, "often we ask, what is wrong with your country?" But then he purposefully shifted the narrative by pulling back the curtain as it were, acknowledging that "we don't start by saying the King of Belgium created a slave colony for 30 years, the government of Belgium then ran the slave colony for another 40 years, the CIA assassinated [the] first popular leader Mr Lumumba and then installed another dictatorship for the next 30 years, and then Glencore and others now suck out your cobalt without giving you tax income." Although his summary is simplified, it does point to a perspective that the residual 'darkness' in Africa is perhaps not *despite* Western activities on the continent but also as a *result* of it.

"...for many across the continent, trauma has been both communal and generational, without a clear beginning or end."

The reality is that for many across the continent, trauma has been both communal and generational, without a clear beginning or end. We have to keep this in mind when we approach and reflect on Africa. Bruce Perry (teacher, clinician and researcher in children's mental health and the neurosciences) has advocated that if we are to understand people in the present then we must acknowledge how the past has the power to shape current functioning. As William Faulkner, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote, "the past is not dead, it's not even past."

Even a cursory look at the history of Africa will admit historical trauma across the continent. These are mass events deliberately inflicted over an extended period to gain and maintain power over a specific group through violence, displacement, domination, and economic deprivation – to erase people's beliefs, values and culture, forcing them to assimilate into the beliefs and culture of the group in power. The prolonged and intergenerational nature of such trauma entrenches its impact deeply within societal structures and individual psyches. Over time, the natural adaptive response to threat becomes embedded and begins to manifest in a myriad of ways that has been seen as a 'deficit in functioning' – be it at the level of the individual or the collective. This means that many people in Africa live in a constant state of survival, with the broad range of consequences that entails.

Furthermore, the original trauma is often re-enacted in subsequent generations, such as the genocide in Rwanda, the mirroring of the slave trade (for example, the slave-like labour in the cobalt mines in Eastern DRC), child soldiers (kidnapped and forced into armed militia groups) or people migrating north towards Europe, often ‘facilitated’ by those who profit from this desperate migration.

Therefore, it shouldn't come as a surprise that, although the continent is rich in culture and resources, it continues to face profound challenges. Conflict, hunger, and poverty have driven over 36 million people from their homes, leading to one of the largest displaced populations in the world. Wars, both internal and cross-border, have ravaged communities, while food insecurity and economic instability push families to flee in search of survival. Refugee camps and makeshift settlements across the continent are overcrowded, under-resourced, and often lack the basic necessities for human dignity. These environments, shaped by the ongoing crises, compound the trauma experienced by millions, many of whom are children, as they struggle to rebuild their lives despite constant instability.

4.1.1 The impact of generational trauma

These experiences leave deep emotional and psychological scars that affect both hearts and minds. The constant exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, and the daily struggle for survival erode a sense of hope and security. Many suffer from anxiety, depression, and trauma-related stress, unable to process the loss and grief they've endured. Children, in particular, face disrupted development and emotional withdrawal, as the absence of stability and education limits their future potential.

What we need is a shift in perspective that no longer asks, “what is wrong with you?” to one that asks, “what’s happened to you?” While this is usually expressed in relation to individuals, it is as applicable to specific communities, broader cultures, and nations. There is a danger, however, that in highlighting the woundedness across many parts of Africa we can end up reinforcing the dark continent label and, perhaps unintentionally, re-enact the need to rescue or to save. An approach that is trauma-informed can counter this by engaging with the effects of intergenerational trauma as well as intergenerational strength and positive resilience present in these communities – towards hope, healing, and freedom from oppression.

“What we need is a shift in perspective that no longer asks, ‘what is wrong with you?’ to one that asks, ‘what’s happened to you?’”

A few ministries working in Africa have begun to understand the importance of doing trauma work before embarking on evangelism work. The reality is that many individuals are simply too traumatised to really hear the gospel and embrace it for themselves.

Trauma often fosters a cycle of despair, where fear and uncertainty overshadow resilience, leaving individuals disconnected from their sense of identity and purpose. Trauma causes the brain to shift into survival mode, shutting down normal cognitive and emotional functions. When an individual experiences trauma, the brain's amygdala, responsible for processing fear, becomes hyperactive, while the prefrontal cortex, which handles reasoning and decision-making, is inhibited. This imbalance keeps individuals in a state of heightened anxiety and stress. The hippocampus, crucial for memory formation, also shrinks under prolonged stress, leading to memory problems and difficulty distinguishing between past and present threats. As a result, trauma traps the brain in a reactive state, impairing emotional regulation, problem-solving, and the ability to move forward with daily life.





When trauma is dealt with, hearts and minds are more open to options and to listen to truth. What follows is a short insert from Favor International who is doing excellent work in highly traumatised environments.

“War created trauma victims of almost every single person living in the north of Uganda and South Sudan. Many have been brutalised physically, sexually and emotionally. Many have seen their family members murdered or they themselves have been forced to murder. Children have seen horrific things and left orphaned, displaced and rejected. People in these situations are left with hopelessness, anger, grief, unbearable pain, and a lack of purpose. Wounded people in turn wound others. In many tribes and villages, war ceased – but violence continued.

Jesus said He came to ‘bind up the broken-hearted’ and now He sends us to do the same. But if we preach the gospel, feed the hungry, help the widows and orphans, but ignore the trauma, we put band-aids on wounds that don’t heal.

For non-Christians, trauma is an obstacle to hearing and understanding the gospel. For believers, trauma creates an obstacle to spiritual growth. We can’t heal a broken heart, but Jesus can. We are His arms extended, His mouthpiece and His hope to the traumatised. Our arms can hold, our hands can touch and our mouths give His Word that goes into the depths of the heart of men and women to heal the broken places.

Favor’s trauma counselling ministry began during the war with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda and post-war national recovery to see God bring healing and hope. Our original curriculum was written by Christian psychologists from Australia, was peer-reviewed through publications at Boston University, and for many years has been adapted and contextualised for the many people groups we serve throughout South Sudan and Uganda.

Yet the counselling services we offer to traumatised communities are not always presented as a religious function, but as a two-week process that works. Often, we advertise: ‘Have continual bad dreams? Too much stress, lack of peace, always angry? Come for trauma counselling to be free from those things!’

Participants learn about the love of Jesus demonstrated for them on the cross, and receive His forgiveness. They then learn to extend forgiveness for the atrocities that have happened to them and become emotionally healthy people to their families. Forgiveness can never be extended unless it’s first received. Once the people have completed the trauma counselling, they are often eager to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. In many communities, this work precedes a three-month long portable Bible School to train and disciple.

The impact of this trauma counselling has been profound. We have seen tribes come together, after years of fighting, to reconcile and even embrace each other. Marriages and families have been restored, suicides averted, and when emotional pain is released often bodies are also healed. The Vice President’s office has just given permission for trauma counselling for them and their staff. ‘Please bring your trauma counselling. We’re all traumatised in South Sudan...’

4.2 THE VALUE OF SYSTEMS THINKING WHEN WORKING IN AFRICA

Working in Africa necessitates a systems-thinking approach, as the continent is profoundly complex and nuanced. Systems thinking, as defined by Roland Flemm in his article, *What is Systems Thinking and Why Should I Care*, “helps to understand the grand scheme of things and how its parts interact. It helps to determine sensible intervention points to make an impactful change in a system.” Applying this approach allows funders and NPOs to grasp not only the visible challenges but also the intricate relationships and forces at play within communities.

The pioneering systems scientist Sir Geoffrey Vickers once observed lobster traps, noticing that lobsters, once inside, couldn’t find a way out, even though they could have used the original entrance as an exit. Reflecting on this, he argued, “We are trapped not so much by the external reality, but by our thinking.”

Similarly, organisations can become ‘trapped’ by traditional approaches to poverty and development, overlooking that our habitual ways of thinking might limit our effectiveness. As Samuel Njenga, director of strategy and training at Systems Thinking Africa, shares from personal experience, “We are stuck doing the same things, again and again, hoping to get different results.” Despite throwing money at the same kinds of poverty programmes, we often see limited, short-term outcomes. We need to examine how our way of thinking has embedded itself in our organisational structures and decision-making processes, sometimes with unintended negative consequences.

“We’ve turned non-profits into beggars through our donor mentality,” Njenga explains. “We’ve embraced ‘chequebook philanthropy,’ offering resources only when business is doing well. But what happens to the people in the village when our giving abruptly stops? We need to move away from mechanistic, linear thinking to systems thinking. It’s not the ‘lobster trap’ that’s our biggest challenge – it’s our thinking about where we are and how we engage with these systems.”

Embracing complexity

Systems thinking is not merely a set of diagnostic tools and methodologies – it is an underlying philosophy. Author and leading systems thinker, Michael Goodman, describes it as “a sensitivity to the circular nature of the societies we live in, an awareness of the role of structure in creating the conditions we face, a recognition that there are powerful laws of systems operating that we are unaware of, a realisation that there are consequences to our actions that we are oblivious to.”

Offering additional insight into the unique nuances of funding within the African context based on her many years of designing and implementing community development projects, Charmaine Smith of Infundo Consulting notes that when we think in terms of systems, we are comfortable to work at the pace of the system, embracing the complexity that goes hand in hand with growing healthy communities. “We think more broadly around our solutions,” says Smith, “considering the long-term impact of our decisions and the inherent causalities of the events that have gone before us.”

In the context of social impact, this holistic approach challenges us to move away from top-down funding models that sustain donor dependence and overlook the intrinsic value and dignity of the communities they serve. “Instead, we consider how to learn from one another, and thus reshape the traditional paradigm into a relationship of equal value and partnership,” she says.

Consciously addressing power dynamics

“When a community’s system operates differently than our own, the temptation is to perceive it as dysfunctional.”

When a community’s system operates differently than our own, the (often unconscious) temptation is to perceive it as dysfunctional. However, when we stop to consider the system, there is no dysfunction – all systems are in flow. “Through my experience,” notes Smith, “I’ve learned that coming into a new community requires humility. It’s important not to presume we have all the answers or are starting something brand new. God has been working in that community long before our arrival. As community builders, our role is to figure out where God has been working and to get behind it. This takes humility – a kind of ruthless curiosity to listen, learn, and un-learn old ways.

“When we enter the room, we need to ask ourselves, what comes with us? Do we come with a humble attitude, or do we feel burdened to have all the answers? Do we talk first, or do we speak last? What is most important to us – the relationships or the project deliverables? How could some of our perspectives be at odds with the system we are working in? How does our entry into the system impact in ways which may not be overtly obvious to us – and what do we need to do, to give up, or shift in us, in order to find a new flow within this system?

“As funders and stewards of capital, it’s important to recognise the position of perceived power we inevitably carry – and we need to intentionally posture ourselves for relationship to re-balance these power dynamics,” says Smith. Vulnerability and transparency go a long way – being honest about our own setbacks and disappointments often invites others to be real about theirs, which then allows us to address the realities and challenges on the ground with honest and more effective solutions.

Going deep before going wide

Building authentic relationships takes time, a commodity often scarce in the fast-paced world of funding and project implementation. Relational integrity is the most critical aspect of any systems thinking worldview. “The complexity of people working together on a project, across different sectors and organisations, can be as complex as working with the community itself,” Smith says. “It’s critical, therefore, to have the right people in the right positions, including those who work ‘between’ the elements of the project and act as ‘catalytic nodes’ that influence and collaborate with other stakeholders.”

She explains that when you take a systems thinking approach to community development, you let the community lead and move at the speed of trust. This emphasises depth, characterised by strong relationships and community ownership, and establishes a unique ‘heartbeat’ that can potentially yield significant impact. Only when there is a new flow at depth, can you consider scaling certain projects over time.



As community builders, our role is to figure out where God has been working and to get behind it. This takes humility – a kind of ruthless curiosity to listen, learn, and un-learn old ways.



Smith adds further valuable insight into these dynamics, saying, “Beneath a culture’s surface lies much that shapes it. Unspoken perspectives and mindsets influence our behaviour, and there is an art to understanding how these underlying dynamics give meaning and direction to our lives.” She explains that “if we omit to consider the factors that shape behaviour, we will assume our strategies will work, only to discover later that nothing has changed or we have created resistance through ineffective management of our intervention. For example, the understanding of inter-generational trauma transfer and the study of epigenetics sheds light on the difficulties of bringing change when the past shapes not just culture and perspective, but even the DNA which connects past generations to how people experience life and behave. We have to take this into account when we work in Africa.”

Systems thinking offers a wider range of choices when working with people, because it takes the interdependency of our actions into account. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution when thinking systemically, because the choices we make will have an impact on the whole system, through its people. “We can rather think of our decisions as a set of iterative decision-making points. As systems are impacted and shift through our presence and action, decisions need to be attuned to this shift and adjust accordingly.” Smith encourages moving beyond our cultural biases and assumptions to embrace a more holistic perspective on the problems we seek to solve and people we seek to understand.

Being a systems thinker demands curiosity, compassion and humility. In the world of social impact, where cross-sector collaboration is essential, it asks all of us to adopt a learning posture – listening, asking questions, and discovering solutions we might have otherwise overlooked, only made possible by viewing things through the lens of another culture or community. In pursuit of more effective impact, perhaps we should heed Dr Wayne Dyer’s advice: “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at, change.”

CONCLUSION

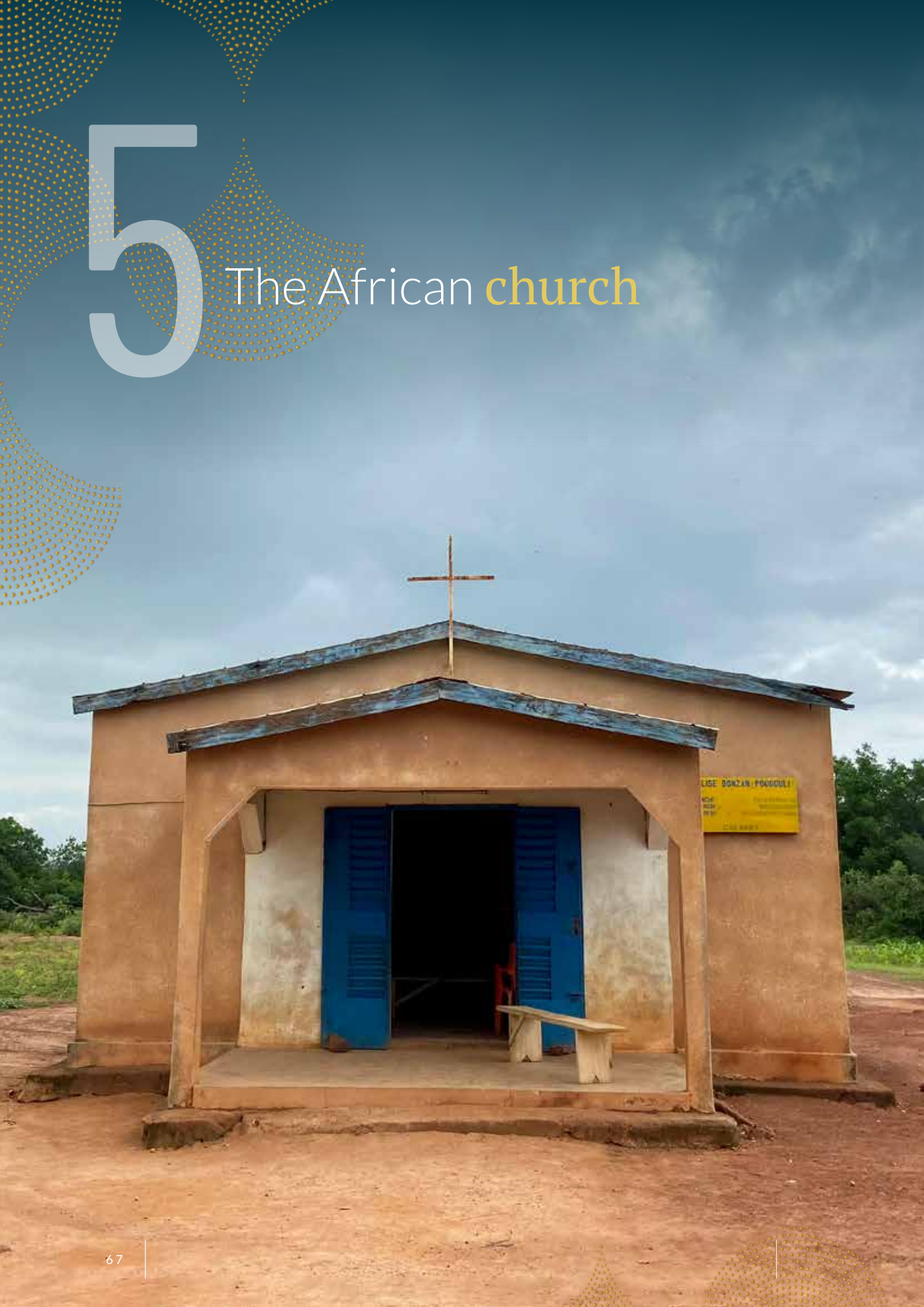
Africa is rich in all its diversity and complexity and our role is to meet people where they are, understanding the unique dynamics of each community. As Smith reminds us, “Jesus listened for 30 years and spoke for three.” We would do well to listen more intently and to learn before we speak or act.

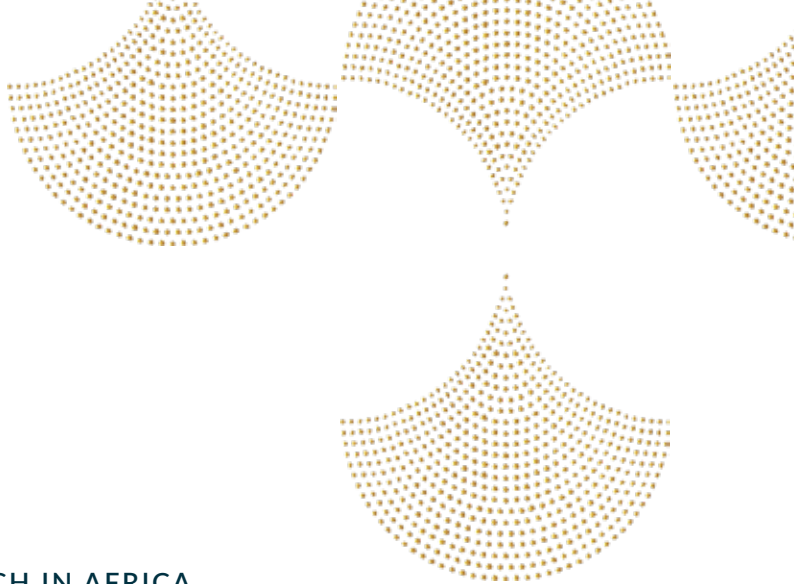
Irish missionary Father Dick van Reeden encapsulates this mindset beautifully: “I know that wherever I go, I’m always learning more than I teach. I know I’ve never brought God anywhere. God was always there before me, and that has been a profound experience.” May we continue to serve this continent’s people with approaches that are as beautiful, diverse, and complex as Africa itself.

We thank Grant Stewart and Charmaine Smith for their meaningful contributions to this section on trauma and systems thinking.

5

The African church





5

The African church

5.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

Introduction

Today, at virtually every missions conference held around the world, missionaries and church leaders affirm that Christian missionary work is no longer “from the West to the rest,” but “from anywhere to everywhere.” Mission scholars believe that the whole church should take the whole gospel to the whole world. The African church is no exception to the Great Commission.

Does the church in Africa really have a significant part to play in world evangelisation?

Many Westerners do not think so. “Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none, only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness,” said British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (quoted in African history: From a European to an African Point of View). “Africa has no history and did not contribute to anything that mankind enjoyed,” said Hegel, the German philosopher. Even as recent as 2007, this belief was echoed by former French president Nicholas Sarkozy in a speech he made in Senegal, “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history... They have never really launched themselves into the future.”

Yet it is probably more an indication of a paternalistic Western worldview that these negative perceptions of Africa still persist today, rather than an indication of truth. Africa has been home to many ancient civilisations, cultures, and traditions, and of course it has played a role in world history.

God at work among the Africans

God has been at work in Africa longer than people may know. The Bible itself provides evidence of Africa’s role in God’s plan of salvation. For example, God chose Africa as the birthplace of the Hebrew nation. Therefore, it is no coincidence that we find Abraham in Egypt, Joseph in Egypt, Jacob in Egypt, Moses in Egypt, Jeremiah in Egypt, and Jesus in Egypt.

Because Moses benefited from the best education Egypt could offer, he could write down whatever God commanded him – therefore Egypt contributed significantly to the writing of the Torah (the Hebrew Scriptures) and by extension, to the development of the Jewish nation.

From the New Testament, we learn that the first centre of the Christian faith was in Jerusalem, before spreading to the rest of the world. Due to its proximity to Israel, and a number of influential early African converts (such as Simon of Cyrene and the Ethiopian royal court official) North Africa became a significant early centre of Christianity. Soon after Pentecost, the faith spread throughout Alexandria (Egypt), Nubia (modern Sudan), Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia). As Samson Fatokun points out in his article, [Christianity in Africa: A Historical Appraisal](#), “By the end of the 4th century, the church in North Africa was vigorous, full of intellectual and spiritual life, well organised and well disciplined. It was a major centre of the Christian faith... [and] made a number of significant contributions to the history and dogma of subsequent Christianity.”

These contributions included:

- “The composition of hymns and regulations for church worship and organisation of this region was readily adopted elsewhere.
- Great leaders, teachers, bishops, apologists and church fathers came from North Africa, including Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Origin, Clement, and others – all of whom influenced the subsequent developments in the church.
- The early church in North Africa also featured greatly in Christian education and... subsequently played a determinative role in the development of both Eastern and Western Christian spirituality and theology.”

Sadly, this once vibrant Christian community that had stood firm against multiple waves of persecution eventually grew weak through the lack of pastoral guidance, a refusal to indigenise the faith, power play and in-fighting in the church (among other things). It was dramatically swept away by Islamic invasions in the 7th century, and eventually the Ethiopian empire was the only region of Africa to survive as a Christian state against the expansion of Islam. This makes the Ethiopian church community highly unique because it was not Christianised by European missionaries – it was indigenous and remained independent, and itself sent missionaries throughout the rest of Africa.

Between the 7th and 10th centuries, Christian populations living in the regions invaded by the Arab Muslim armies suffered a range of mild to extreme consequences, from being subject to a special tax (the *jizya*), to severe persecution. Egypt proved remarkably resistant to Islamisation and Christians still constituted the majority of the population until the 10th century. Under the reign of the Fatimid dynasty, however, the exceptionally cruel religious persecution, destruction of churches, and forced conversions to Islam changed the status quo.

A new phase began in the late 15th century, when European explorers and missionaries (especially Catholic missionaries from Portugal) began arriving in Africa. In his article, *The History of Christian Missions to Africa*, Norman Etherington comments that “the prevalent mission model until the late 19th century was a station under the direction of a single European family whose religious and educational endeavours were directed at a small number of African residents.” He points out that, “Mission publications of the 19th and 20th centuries can convey a misleading impression that the key agents in the spread of African Christianity were foreign-born white





males. Not only does this neglect the work of women as wives and teachers, but it diverts attention from the Africans who were everywhere the dominant force in the spread of modern Christianity.”

By the beginning of the 20th century, Christian evangelism had escaped the bounds of mission stations and the work of African prophets and independent evangelists, once dismissed as heretical or syncretic, gradually came to be recognised as a “legitimate acculturation of religion in new environments,” according to Etherington. Decolonisation, however, “caught most foreign mission operations unawares and required major changes, most notably in the recruitment of African clergy to the upper echelons of church hierarchies. By the late 20th century Africans emerged as an independent force in Christian missions, sending agents to other continents.”

A sleeping giant

As mentioned before, Africans have been active in the spread of the gospel from the earliest days of Christianity. Many were simply ordinary people taking the gospel to the next village, but others were formally recognised missionaries and ordained evangelists and ministers.

The work of missions was, however, understandably slowed down by the counter forces of Islamisation, Western colonisation, the slave trade, the struggle for political independence, and the knack of political and economic powers to twist theology to create ‘biblical’ justification for their actions. In the 19th century, for example, a distorted interpretation of the curse of Noah’s son Ham in Genesis 9:22–24 by American pro-slavery preachers popularised the narrative that (black) African people as descendants of Ham are eternally cursed and divinely doomed to enslavement. In the 20th century, reformed theologians in South Africa appealed to the Bible with great confidence in favour of Apartheid, arguing that it clearly supported the oppression of Africans.

Across Africa, people were separated from their loved ones, while traditional societies and economies were disrupted. The numbers are staggering. According to the United Nations, more than 15 million men, women and children (mostly from West and Central Africa) were the victims of the [tragic transatlantic slave trade](#) over 400 years, and it is regarded as one of the darkest chapters in human history. In addition, between 6–10 million Africans were victims of the Arab slave trade, which transported people from the sub-Saharan regions to North Africa, to be sold into the Mediterranean and the Middle East. And in its mere 23 years of operation, the brutal Belgian colonisation of what became known as the Congo Free State, either murdered or worked to death [an estimated 10 million people](#), which accounted for half the population.

When we reflect on the continent’s centuries of subjugation and suffering therefore, we can understand why the church in Africa became a sleeping giant.

Yet the work of missions played an important role in the struggle for independence. In his well-written chapter African Nationalism and the Struggle for Freedom, Vincent Khapoya argues that the “catalytic role of the church in developing African nationalism arose from the education that the church schools provided in colonial Africa.” It gave Africans the “skills with which to articulate their demands and question the legitimacy of colonial authorities,” and also “turned out to be a

powerful medium of African acculturation of Western Christian values, values that the African very cleverly and ingeniously... incorporated into political debate over their struggles for freedom.” The majority of the first generation of African leaders, among them Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Léopold Senghor (Senegal), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), and Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Malawi), were products of missionary education in their own countries.



CONCLUSION

It seems as if the history of the church in Africa has come full circle – from Christianity’s earliest roots in North Africa, through the profound challenges of colonisation, slavery and constant political upheaval, to the current reality that there are now [more Christians in Africa](#) than on any other continent in the world. The centre of gravity of Christianity has seen an extreme shift from the global North to the global South. Although some may describe it as “a mile wide and an inch deep,” the resilience of the African church is a powerful reminder that God’s work transcends boundaries, and Africa’s rich spiritual legacy has much to offer to the world. Let the sleeping giant awake!

We thank Peter Vumisa for his meaningful contribution to this section on the history of the church in Africa.

5.2 AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCHES (AICS)

Defined by their history

Over the last 100 years Africa has seen a drive towards indigenisation in the church, away from being led by colonial churches as in the past. Many scholars have referred to these emerging expressions of Christianity as African initiated churches (AICs), which can be defined as “churches founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans.”

This closely relates to the definition used by the Organisation of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), which understands an AIC to be a church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has seceded from a mission church, or has been founded as an independent entity under African initiative and leadership. It would be fair to say that there is to be found a vast range in doctrines across AICs, from purely biblical adherents to syncretistic beliefs. The sizes of these churches vary – some are very small while others are mega (e.g. the Zion Christian Church in South Africa and the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria both claim membership in the millions).

The first generation

The first AICs emerged from mission churches. This was generally to protest colonialism – African Christians split from the churches initiated and supervised by missionaries from the colonising nations and founded churches under their own leadership. Often these events were connected to political and national independence movements in the former colonies.

The theology and structure adopted by the newly initiated churches often mimicked the churches from which they seceded.



Because of the focus on independence from foreign leadership, these churches were termed independent, separatist, or nationalist. Although some of these first-generation AICs still exist (such as the Lutheran Bapedi church in South Africa, which seceded from the Berlin mission church in the late-19th century) many have since disappeared. Others have incorporated African traditional religion or Pentecostal elements, meaning that they have become part of the second generation of AICs.

The second generation

The second generation of AICs emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. While in the first generation the focus was on autonomy, the second generation focused on indigenisation and hybridisation. Elements of African traditional religions and local cultures were incorporated into Christian religious practice and belief. For example, these churches assume spiritual forces to be intertwined with the social and material world, and they believe that spiritual forces (whether good or evil) have an influence on people's lives, well-being, and social relations. The 'Holy Spirit' plays a fundamental role in the theology of many of these churches.

The second generation of AICs are often called spiritual or indigenous churches, and they are characterised by adult baptism by full immersion, strict moral codes, strict normative behavioural ethics based on literal Bible hermeneutics, the importance of sanctified objects, and (often white) liturgical gowns worn by believers. Self-designations are Aladura churches in West Africa, Roho / Akurinu in East Africa, and Zionist / Apostolic churches in Southern Africa. Although particularly attractive to the socially marginalised, they have established themselves in all strata of society, particularly in Southern Africa.

The third generation

The third generation of AICs are closely related to the global Pentecostal movement, but are nonetheless considered an indigenous religious movement. While classical Pentecostal churches had emerged in Africa in the first half of the 20th century, the African Pentecostal / charismatic churches are a post-independence phenomenon, emerging from the 1970s onward.

Although these churches generally distance themselves from African traditional belief systems and culture, they still accommodate a worldview that spiritual forces influence the material world and social relations. The Holy Spirit is central to these churches' theology, and they are generally led by charismatic preachers. In their exuberant worship services, emotions and individual religious encounters play an important role.

There is often an over-emphasis on success and prosperity in this life, rooted in the belief "that God wants believers to prosper physically, materially and spiritually." As a result, these churches have mostly gathered the urban, upwardly mobile middle classes, but they can increasingly be found in rural and in lower-income parts of the population as well.



Challenges presented by African initiated churches

While AICs have had many positive impacts on contextualising Christianity, there are also some negative effects and challenges associated with their growth and practices. These include:

- *Doctrinal divergence:* Theological and doctrinal differences between AICs and mainstream Christian denominations can lead to confusion and conflict. Some AICs adopt beliefs and practices that are considered unorthodox by other Christian groups, potentially leading to fragmentation within the Christian community.
- *Syncretism:* The blending of Christian beliefs with traditional African religious practices can result in syncretism, where elements of different religions are mixed in ways that may dilute or distort core Christian teachings. This can lead to controversies and criticisms from more orthodox Christian groups.
- *Leadership and accountability issues:* Some AICs are centred around charismatic leaders who wield significant influence over their congregations. In some cases, this can lead to authoritarian leadership styles, lack of accountability, and abuses of power. Instances of financial mismanagement, exploitation, and moral failings among leaders have been reported.
- *Exclusivity and sectarianism:* Certain AICs may adopt exclusive or sectarian attitudes, isolating themselves from other Christian groups and discouraging their members from interacting with the broader Christian community. This can lead to division within the Christian faith.
- *Health and safety concerns:* Some AICs place a strong emphasis on faith healing and spiritual practices to the exclusion of medical treatment. This can lead to negative health outcomes for members who forego conventional medical care in favour of spiritual healing rituals.
- *Economic exploitation:* In some cases, the financial demands placed on members by AICs can be burdensome. High expectations for financial contributions can strain the resources of congregants, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities.
- *Prophetic claims and predictions:* The emphasis on prophecy and revelation in some AICs can lead to problematic situations when prophetic claims and predictions fail to materialise. This can result in disillusionment among followers and damage the credibility of the church.
- *Cultural isolation:* While AICs play a role in preserving African cultural identity, this can sometimes lead to cultural isolation when congregants are discouraged from engaging with broader society. This can limit opportunities for integration and mutual understanding with other communities.

CONCLUSION

While AICs have contributed significantly to the growth and contextualisation of Christianity in Africa, they also face challenges and criticisms. Addressing these negative effects requires ongoing dialogue, transparency, and intentional effort to hold leadership accountable, maintain doctrinal integrity, and prioritise the well-being of congregants. The vast spread and sheer number of AICs in Africa demand attention, and thorough theological training of pastors is one of the most important contributions the global church can offer believers in Africa.

We thank Cain Matloko for his meaningful contribution to this section on AICs.



5.3 THE IMPACT OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

“God wants you to live in abundance!” “If you sow a seed, God will open the floodgates of heaven.” “What you say is what you get, just speak it and you’ll receive it!” These are typical words spoken from many pulpits in Africa, promoting the idea that faith and “positive confession” can lead to health, wealth, and prosperity.

The prosperity gospel (also described as a transactional gospel) focusses on divine provision and blessings by distorting the biblical message of grace and generosity. It often elevates personal gain over the basic precepts of the gospel, cultivating materialism and self-centred spirituality. The belief is that suffering, pain and poverty are signs of a lack of faith or God’s displeasure – that this is not the reward of a true believer because Jesus died to “purchase a good and abundant life for us.”

This is the unfortunate narrative of many churches across Africa.

The prosperity gospel therefore influences people to view poverty as a curse, and wealth as a divine right, leading to an unhealthy fixation on financial success. Church members are taught that their level of financial blessing directly correlates with their tithing and ‘seed-sowing’ efforts, often to the detriment of hard work and productivity. When these promises of financial blessing do not materialise, it can lead to a sense of guilt that is vulnerable to spiritual manipulation. Some preachers even teach that those who don’t tithe are bound for hell.

Factors driving the prosperity gospel’s growth

The prosperity gospel is common in many African regions, especially West Africa. In his book, *Preachers Of A Different Gospel*, Femi Adeleye notes that the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa of Nigeria, Archbishop Duncan Williams of Ghana, and Bishop David Oyedepo of Nigeria were some of the leading figures in the prosperity gospel movement in West Africa. To a large extent, these three men shaped Christianity in West Africa, and continues to define it.

It has to be acknowledged that televangelism has played a big role in spreading prosperity theology across Africa. These rousing TV programmes and international faith conferences have been broadcast into urban centres and rural villages across the continent – influencing not only church members, but also African pastors, who began weaving prosperity teaching into their messages.

Many AICs were already emphasising the ‘tangible benefits’ of the Christian faith such as physical healing, spiritual deliverance and material blessing, which created a theological environment where the prosperity gospel could easily take root. Prosperity teaching fitted in well with the AICs’ themes of divine intervention in everyday struggles, which resonated with many who were dealing with financial hardship. Prominent African preachers, especially in Nigeria, also adapted this message to their own contexts, teaching that prosperity is a God-given mandate for Africans to rise above poverty and lack. Over time, these influential pastors built large church networks and emerged as perfect examples of the belief that God’s favour results in material rewards.

This blend of local and global influences has led to an indigenised form of the prosperity gospel across Africa, and several factors contribute to its widespread appeal:

- *Poverty and economic instability*: As mentioned before, the message of divine favour rewarding the faithful with wealth and success brings hope to those struggling with poverty, especially in areas where there is a lack of economic opportunities.
- *Misuse of Scripture*: Passages like Malachi 3:10 are frequently misapplied to coerce financial contributions with promises of miraculous financial returns.
- *Charismatic leadership*: Flamboyant pastors who display wealth through private jets, luxury cars, and grand buildings attract followers who aspire to emulate their perceived success.
- *Competition among churches*: The proliferation of churches seeking to grow their congregations has led to tactics that prioritise attracting members over spiritual discipleship.
- *Urbanisation and the appeal of 'success theology'*: Rapid urbanisation in Africa has heightened aspirations for financial success, making the prosperity gospel's message of personal empowerment and financial breakthrough especially appealing. The prosperity gospel's focus on quick transformation and material results differs from traditional Christian teachings on patience and sacrifice, making it more attractive to people seeking immediate change in urban settings.

Economic and social implications

While the prosperity gospel may, in some cases, inspire entrepreneurial activity, it often discourages genuine economic development. Many people prioritise supernatural intervention over diligent effort, resulting in a lack of financial planning, disorganised lifestyles, and dependency on 'miracles' for success. This teaching also places significant financial strain on church members, who may prioritise church contributions over basic needs such as education and healthcare.

The transactional nature of the prosperity message reinforces a 'give-to-get' mindset, backed up by verses like: "Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first-fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9–10) and "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6–7). This often undermines biblical stewardship principles and communal values. The core of African cultural values is community – a belief in communal flourishing and not leaving anyone behind. These values are not visible in the prosperity gospel, where we see only the leadership "being blessed by God" and the followers' poverty state blamed on their "not giving enough."

Generational shifts

The younger generation is increasingly critical of the prosperity gospel though, with many rejecting its teachings as exploitative and inconsistent with the true message of Christ. Many young people are boldly calling out prosperity preachers on social media for their extravagant living while their congregation lives in poverty. Terms like ‘pastorpreneurs’ have emerged, reflecting scepticism towards leaders who appear to profit from their congregations’ giving. This paradigm shift creates opportunities for reintroducing a gospel that emphasises holistic discipleship, kingdom stewardship, and redemptive suffering.

Recommendations for NPOs, churches, and funders

To effectively address the challenges posed by the prosperity gospel, funders and those working in the region should take a contextual and holistic approach. Understanding the local beliefs and socio-economic realities in the communities they aim to support is essential.

Suggested strategies include:

- *Partner with accountable organisations:* Collaborate with organisations that prioritise transparency, integrity, and accountability. Such partnerships can provide a stable foundation for countering the economic and spiritual harm caused by exploitative teachings.
- *Equip pastors with theological integrity:* Develop or use already existing training programmes for pastors to deepen their understanding of sound theological principles. Emphasise integrity, stewardship, giving as an act of worship and service rather than a means to personal gain, and the rejection of transactional approaches to faith.
- *Empower people through discipleship and training:* Invest in ministries that teach biblical perspectives on wealth, stewardship, and suffering, and that also equip people with the practical tools to address their economic challenges through vocational and financial training. These efforts can help shift mindsets from dependency on miracles to disciplined financial practices.

By considering some of these strategies, we can promote a Christ-centred, economically sustainable approach to wealth and stewardship, fostering long-term transformation in communities affected by the prosperity gospel.

CONCLUSION

We live in a fallen world where suffering will always be a part of life in varying forms and degrees (Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 3:12). The gospel shows us that God often works through suffering to sanctify us. We need to understand that the purpose of wealth, according to God’s redemptive plan, is that it should be utilised in stewarding kingdom growth and emancipation of God’s people so that they can also bear fruit and continue with the mandate of wise kingdom stewardship.

5.4 THE CHURCH IN NORTH AFRICA

The North African church has several different characteristics from the rest of Africa. First, the worldview of most communities in North Africa leans more heavily into an honour-shame culture than the rest of Africa. Second, the level of persecution brought about by Islamic fundamentalists means that many times the Christian church has to operate underground, resulting in smaller, more organic expressions. Third, the Arab Spring has had far-reaching effects, including an increasing dissatisfaction with (or even rejection of) organised religion by younger generations.

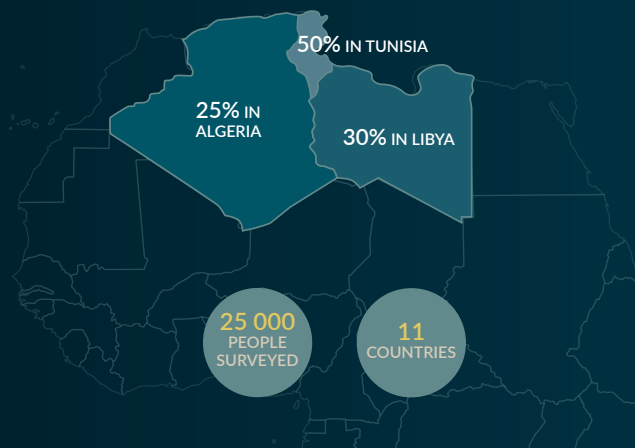
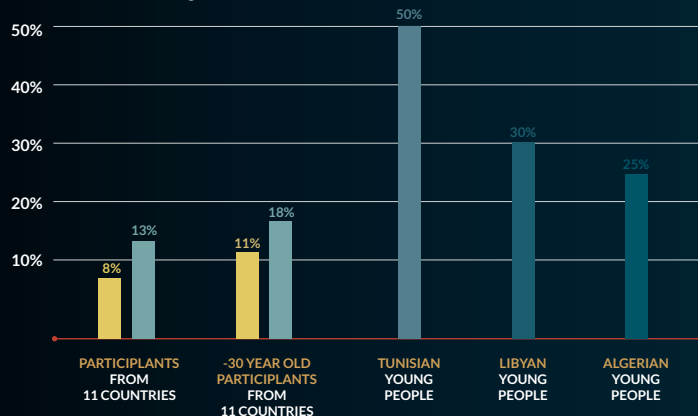
The rise of secularism in North Africa

In North Africa, as in the wider MENA region, more and more young people are identifying as non-religious. Ricard González in the *Equal Times*, 2020 noted, “In a region where religion and politics are intimately linked, one of the reasons for this decline in religiosity and the waning trust in religious institutions may be the disappointment with Islamist parties, in light of their poor performance since the so-called Arab Spring.”

Perhaps the most comprehensive study highlighting this shift is the 2019 Arab Barometer (an annual macro-survey conducted since 2006 by an international network of institutions) in which more than 25,000 people from 11 countries in the region took part. According to the survey, those who described themselves as “not religious” rose from 8% to 13% in a single year, with the increase being even larger among under-30s, which rose from 11% to 18%. In the countries where the Arab Spring and its dissatisfaction with the political status quo had particularly far-reaching effects, the percentage of non-religious young people is significantly higher – 50% in Tunisia, about 30% in Libya, and 25% in Algeria.

2019 ARAB BAROMETER

Population identifying as 'NOT RELIGIOUS'



The Arab Barometer points, moreover, to a considerable decline in overall support for Islamist parties, which has dropped to 20% across all age groups, compared with 35% in 2013. The level of trust in religious leaders has also fallen. Seven years ago, 50% of the respondents said they had a “great” or “medium” level of trust in religious leaders. That figure has now dropped to 40%. According to Georges Fahmi, an Egyptian researcher at the European University Institute in Florence, the figures are compatible with his empirical observations. “It is a trend that is manifested in different ways, ranging from the women taking off the headscarf or the men who no longer pray, or only pray on Fridays, but insist they are still Muslims, to those who have lost faith in religion altogether, saying they no longer believe in God.”

There is also a communication crisis on the part of the religious authorities, “who are failing to connect with young people and their concerns,” he adds. The younger generation is more outward looking than previous ones, especially thanks to the internet and social media, and there is an ever greater disconnect between their personal aspirations and the unyielding official line.

Opinions from trusted Christian leaders in the region

We interviewed several leading Christian figures to gain deeper insight into the state of the church in North Africa as well as draw out implications and opportunities for the global church. Their cautions and recommendations have been summarised below.

Understanding the unique context of each nation

Every leader we interviewed made a similar statement about “never having an umbrella approach to the region.” Each nation is different and therefore has a different expression of the wider trends within the region. For example, the following distinctions emerged relating to the readiness for the gospel in the different nations:

- A season of ‘rough soil / ploughing’ in Libya and Mauritania, with a focus on frontier missions, creative access, church planting, and media outreach.
- A season of ‘planting seed / early growth’ in Morocco and Tunisia, with a focus on discipleship and leadership development.
- A season of ‘increasing growth / harvest’ in Egypt, Algeria and Sudan, with a focus on leadership development and supporting the persecuted church so they can survive this difficult time.

Responding to a vulnerable youth population

Children and youth are often neglected, and not being disciplined to become the next generation of leaders. The church is struggling to engage young people and therefore many of them end up turning to atheism in their search for the truth in a society where they have a limited voice. This is also a wonderful opportunity for the church to invest in the lives of hungry young people who will be the future leaders of the church and wider society.

Responding to discrimination against women

Unfortunately, the same gender-based discrimination so prevalent in the region also applies to women in the church. Women are mostly excluded from leadership even though they are often the most active members, leading various church activities. They are key to unlocking access to families and involved in active discipleship in their homes and wider communities.

Engaging the whole body of Christ

There appears to be a strong tendency from external partners to engage only with a particular part of the body of Christ in the region. Although there are distinct differences between the historical church (often Orthodox), the Evangelical church and the Muslim background believer (MBB) church movement, the importance of all three of these role players in transforming the region should not be ignored. A narrow view of the church in the region will not only limit the impact of the whole church in the region, but will also contribute to further alienation and isolation.

The testimony of the church lies in its unity and diversity. Yet much damage has been done in the past by alienating the church in its various expressions from each other by reckless application of funding and duplicating Western models and denominational lenses rather than allowing the local church to form its own identity and local expression. Here is a look at some of the church expressions:

- *The non-MBB church* (referring to internationally affiliated churches run by indigenous people e.g. Catholic church) in the region is not large, and often focussed on serving foreigners. There is an opportunity to engage and equip the church to become a major transformational force through a better understanding of its role and place within the wider church body.
- *The CBB church* (referring to Christian background churches, that could include Evangelicals and Orthodox) is poised to be a strong missions force in the region, but security issues and fear of engaging in evangelism and discipleship have severely limited its impact. In Egypt especially there is a growing missional awareness that should be encouraged, equipped and leveraged.
- *Sub-Saharan African MBBs* are able to operate more 'above ground' and should therefore be mobilised as a strategic mission force. Much more can be done to support those who train and send these missionaries.
- *The MBB movement* is often over-shadowed by the CBB church, but is bigger in numbers than the CBB church in all the North African nations, except Egypt. They are the most significant missions force in especially Morocco, Algeria and Libya and carry with them the potential to develop and establish a truly indigenous church.

The important role of media in missions

As a result of the widespread persecution, media serves as a powerful tool for Christians in North Africa, significantly enhancing the impact of church and mission work. Still, effective use of media evangelism is complementary and should never replace face-to-face engagement and personally connecting new believers to a physical community of faith. The strengths of using media as a tool for missions include:

- *Wide reach:* Using various media channels to distribute sermons, testimonies, and Christian teachings in video, audio or written formats means the message of the gospel can reach a wide audience, as well as people in remote and restricted areas.
- *Cultural engagement:* Media allows the church to engage with the local culture through relevant and contextualised content. This can include music, films, and literature that resonate with the local population while conveying Christian values and messages.
- *Training and discipleship:* Through various media channels, churches and mission organisations can offer educational content such as Bible studies, theological courses, and discipleship programmes. This can equip local leaders and missionaries with the skills and knowledge they need to effectively carry out their work, and can also disciple new believers and help them grow in their faith.



- *Encouragement and support:* Media allows for the sharing of stories and testimonies that encourage and strengthen the faith of believers, especially those who may be isolated or facing persecution. It provides a sense of community and connection among Christians in the region.
- *Advocacy and awareness:* Media can be used to highlight issues facing Christians in North Africa, such as persecution, social justice, and human rights concerns. This can mobilise prayer and support from the global church and raise awareness of the needs and challenges in the region.
- *Crisis response and humanitarian aid:* In times of crisis, such as natural disasters or conflicts, media can be used very effectively to coordinate and communicate relief efforts, mobilise resources, and provide information to those in need.

5.5 THE THEOLOGICAL HEALTH OF PASTORS IN AFRICA

Because the church is so prolific across the continent of Africa, the leaders of the church have disproportional influence across vast geographies and peoples. Let us take a deeper look at the role and theological health of these leaders, as well as some suggestions to grow the body of Christ.

Understanding the challenges and pressures of an African pastor

In rural Africa, a pastor is not only a preacher – he fulfils multiple roles. Patrick Mokgosi from Orchard Africa explains that “because of the needs in the community where the pastor serves, everybody ends up depending on the pastor for everything. He preaches, serves the community, provides counselling, supports families who have lost loved ones, and often serves as a local ambulance to take the sick to a health facility.” This can become an overwhelming burden – eventually affecting the pastor’s health and family life. Physically exhausted and suffering from stress, many end up stumbling into moral failure, or quitting the ministry for a less demanding, better-paying job so that they can fulfil their roles as fathers and husbands.

Within this context, it is understandable that most pastors (especially in more rural areas) have not gone through any form of formal theological training due to: financial constraints, the remoteness of communities where they serve, the distance of training opportunities, and their level of education.

In urban areas it is more common for churches to be led by pastors who have gone through at least some form of theological training, due to easier access to training opportunities and resources. And since mainline churches such as the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Ethiopian and Dutch Reformed churches have a strong emphasis on biblical doctrine, pastors have to first go through theological training at a recognised institution before being ordained for ministry.

Understanding 'theological health'

'Theological health' refers to the alignment between a pastor's beliefs, teachings, and actions in accordance with biblical doctrine. In Africa, pastors frequently encounter issues that challenge their theological health, such as:

- *Theological education and accessibility:* Many pastors lack access to formal theological training due to financial constraints or geographic limitations. Without formal education, they may miss the depth and breadth of doctrinal knowledge necessary for effective ministry.
- *Cultural and social pressures:* Socio-political pressures, including poverty, crime, and high unemployment rates, impact the theological outlook of pastors. Pastors must navigate the tension between addressing social issues in their communities and maintaining doctrinal integrity, often stretching their limited resources and theological understanding.
- *Financial strains and burnout:* Financial instability and the emotional toll of ministry lead many pastors to burnout, especially in rural and underserved areas where resources are scarce. In such situations, pastoral health declines, weakening the church's ability to serve its congregation and community effectively.

The following anecdotal comments by Dr Reuben van Rensburg, project director of Re-Forma, a global initiative focussed on equipping and certifying church and ministry leaders, confirm the general lack of theological health among pastors in Africa.

"As I write this, I have recently returned from meetings in Kenya, one of which was to share about the work of Re-Forma with principals of various learning centres. At one point I asked them to tell me any verse in the Bible that mentioned children, sons, and daughters. They did not need to quote the verse or even mention where it appears, but simply offer a rough idea of the content. I was shocked that out of the 52 delegates in the hall, only four could give me a verse. When I asked them other simple questions, such as "Who cut Samson's hair?" or "How many animals of each kind did Noah take on the ark?" not a single person could give a correct answer. As we have travelled to various countries in Africa, this is not an isolated case – knowledge of the Bible is extremely poor among pastors.

Coupled with this are the now well-documented statistics about untrained or under-trained pastors in Africa. For example, Dr Nelson Makanda, the former general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya, says that according to his research, 76% of pastors in Kenya are untrained. Bishop Mususu, a board member of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), says that of the 1,500 churches he oversees in Zambia, only 110 have trained pastors. Furthermore, the majority of churches we have encountered, have very small congregations, which means that the pastor is often tasked with responsibilities which would usually be given to responsible church leaders, especially financial record-keeping, and administration.

In addition, many pastors are bi-vocational, which means that they have very little time for adequate sermon preparation, Bible study and prayer. Some only have a primary school qualification and will never be able to enter Bible schools or seminaries, which are also far too costly, even if they did have the necessary entry requirements. Naturally, attending a residential programme that would require them to leave their ministry for an extended period of time is out of the question. Although the Pentecostal

church as a whole has generally moved away from the idea that having the Holy Spirit and the Bible is enough equipping to be an effective preacher, there are still some pastors who would argue for that concept.

It is also noteworthy that we have discovered that several pastors simply lack integrity, which has a negative effect on their ministry. For example, a pastor who attended one of our Quality Assurance Institutes as a registered facilitator, was admitted to hospital a few months later and called our national representative in that country and told her that "Reuben has authorised you to pay my hospital bills." Another, who attended, was later discovered not to have a church and not to have a group of pastors he was meant to be training, the very things required in order to attend!

Many pastors in Africa are enamoured by the prosperity gospel, and simply copy the practices they see on channels like TBN – to the severe detriment of the church. Many feel that they have to give themselves titles in order to be more influential, like Oracle of God! Some give their churches names which try to persuade attendees how powerful and effective their ministry is, for example, Maximum Miracles Church!

When these factors are taken together, it is clear that the theological health of many pastors in Africa is very poor and I am convinced that collaboration among organisations involved with pastoral training of the untrained and undertrained is absolutely vital, so that these issues can be addressed."

Suggested strategies for biblically grounded pastors

If Africa was to play an integral role in world evangelisation over the next 50 years, we as the global body of Christ should be asking how we can best support the maturing and effectiveness of the African church.

As much as there are so many aspects of the African church that we want to cheer on in its missional role, there are some things that need to be urgently addressed in order for it to not falter or reproduce a weak kind of Christianity in its wake. As a prime example, we have long been haunted by an anecdotal statistic that says there are a million untrained pastors in Africa. As mentioned above, we know from research from the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya that more than 75% of its pastors are untrained. Kenya ranks as having the third highest access to theological training in Africa. How much higher could this statistic be for other countries?

What about the cost of training? What kind of models are needed to effectively train such a large number of pastors? How could we make these models costs effective and scalable? Several larger, formal seminaries are trying to make inroads into Africa, but generally these models are too costly, and often extractive (they remove the pastor from their home environment for too long), and miss the importance of being contextually relevant (this type of theology taught does not match the needs or minister to the hearts of people in their context). There are several fit-for-

purpose ministry models that are working on the ground, but need capacity to enable them to have a significant impact in solving the problem.

Then there is another factor to consider. Theological training alone does not make for a healthy pastor. As it is said, “knowledge of the Bible is a poor measure of spiritual maturity.” Integrity, stewardship of resources, and misuse of power are three important additional factors to be considered. As a generalisation, Africa is not well schooled in stewardship. This combined with evidences of lack of integrity means that resources are often abused for personal gain. When this happens, sound theology can be a “noisy gong or clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1) in the ears of people and may cause greater damage. In a power-fear dominated worldview, the ‘man of God’ syndrome has a similar effect where pastors give themselves incredulous titles that serve to create an image of power.

The sustainability of kingdom impact therefore involves not just short-term solutions, but strategies that cultivate long-term growth and resilience among pastors. Here are a few suggested focus areas to enhance theological health and sustainable kingdom impact across Africa.

Theological education

Education is fundamental to theological health. Donors and theological organisations should focus on expanding theological education for pastors in Africa. This can be done through:

- *Scholarships and financial assistance:* Providing scholarships for pastors to attend accredited theological colleges can remove financial barriers that prevent access to essential education.
- *Partnerships with local seminaries:* Working alongside seminaries and Bible colleges in Africa can help pastors gain a deeper understanding of scripture, ethics, and Christian doctrine. Such partnerships can also improve local theological programmes’ quality and accessibility.
- *Online courses and distance learning:* For pastors in remote areas, online or distance learning courses offer valuable, flexible options for theological training. Developing accessible, contextually relevant online courses can empower pastors to learn without leaving their communities.

Contextual training

Contextual training enables pastors to address unique local challenges without compromising theological principles. Effective training must reflect the realities of Africa’s social, economic, and cultural landscape. Donors can help promote culturally relevant training through:

- *Contextualised theology programmes:* Working with local educators and theologians, theological organisations can develop curriculum content that speaks to Africa’s unique context, allowing pastors to address local issues with biblically sound and culturally sensitive solutions.
- *Resource development for social issues:* Providing resources on topics like poverty alleviation, community development, and reconciliation equips pastors to tackle pressing societal issues within a theological framework.

Emotional and spiritual wellness

The well-being of pastors is crucial to their ministry effectiveness and longevity. Donors and organisations can provide support that addresses both emotional and spiritual wellness through:

- *Mentorship and accountability programmes:* Connecting pastors with mentors who can offer guidance, wisdom, and accountability can strengthen their spiritual resilience and foster a support network.
- *Counselling services:* Providing access to counselling services for pastors and their families can alleviate stress and reduce burnout. Support for mental health enables pastors to maintain emotional balance and continue serving with vitality.
- *Spiritual retreats and sabbaticals:* Encouraging regular times of rest and reflection allows pastors to refresh spiritually. Retreats and sabbaticals give them the space to reconnect with God, realign their vision, and sustain their calling.

Financial health and resource management

Financial stability is often one of the most significant challenges pastors faces, and it directly impacts their ability to serve effectively. Donors can support financial health initiatives by:

- *Providing micro-grants for ministry projects:* Small grants allow pastors to launch community-oriented projects without financial strain. Such grants empower pastors to make a local impact that aligns with kingdom goals.
- *Teaching financial stewardship:* Workshops and resources on budgeting, fundraising, and financial planning can equip pastors with the tools needed to manage church finances and personal finances responsibly.
- *Supporting bi-vocational ministry:* Many pastors supplement their income through secondary employment. Providing resources and support for pastors who choose bi-vocational ministry enables them to balance their calling and personal financial needs sustainably.

Community collaboration and peer networks

Isolation is a common challenge in pastoral ministry, especially in rural areas. Building community networks allows pastors to share resources, learn from one another, and address challenges collectively. Donors and theological organisations can promote collaboration through:

- *Pastor networks and conferences:* By funding regional gatherings or conferences, pastors from various backgrounds can come together to share insights, resources, and encouragement.
- *Interdenominational support groups:* Establishing support groups that cross denominational lines helps to foster unity, learning, and mutual support among pastors facing similar challenges.

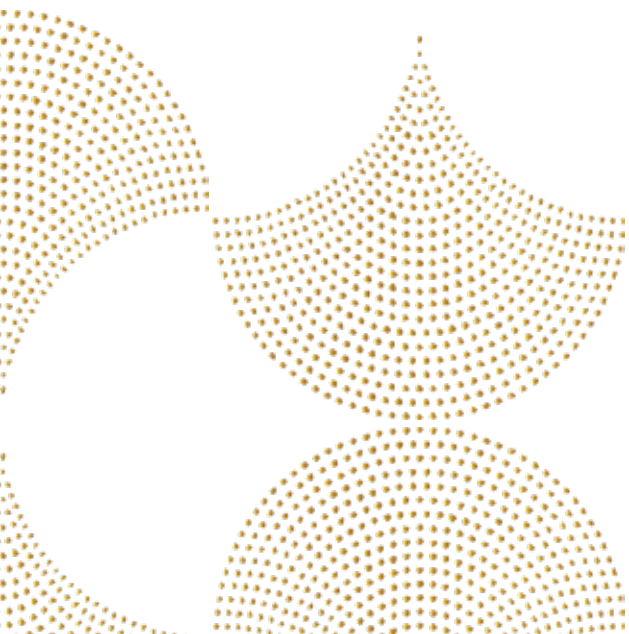




- *Local church partnerships:* Partnering churches in urban and rural areas for fellowship and resource sharing can create stronger bonds and promote a more unified Christian witness across different regions.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable kingdom impact involves creating long-lasting spiritual, social, and economic change that reflects Christ's teachings. For donors and theological organisations in Africa, supporting pastors is essential to achieving this goal, as they are at the forefront of serving and influencing their communities. Without healthy, biblically-grounded pastors, the foundation of Christian ministry weakens, impacting both the spiritual life of congregants and the broader societal influence of the church.



6 Money and power in Africa



6

Money and power in Africa

6.1 HOW TO FUND BETTER

The influence of Western funding on African socio-economic development

There has been a rich and sometimes chequered history of Western funding in Africa. It is a colourful tapestry woven with threads of extreme goodwill, personal ambition, and many unintended consequences.

For this reason, mention 'Africa' and 'aid' and two main stereotypes immediately come to mind. The one being frequent incidences of mismanagement, where funds intended for infrastructure and social programmes disappear into the coffers of corrupt officials. The other being equally frequent incidences of well-meaning but misguided donors who impose their own solutions without a proper understanding of the local context.

Dambisa Moyo, in her seminal work *Dead Aid*, argues that while billions have been poured into African economies with the noble aim of alleviating poverty and fostering development, this has often resulted in dependency and stunted growth. Could this money be invested in a better way?

From our perspective, one major challenge is that Western funding in Africa overwhelmingly favours expatriate-led nonprofits over locally-led organisations. According to the Segal Family Foundation—which partners with over 350 organisations in sub-Saharan Africa—along with other grant data, only 1% to 10% of global funding goes to locally-led organisations. Despite expatriate-led organisations growing at roughly twice the rate of local organisations, these locally-led organisations have a comparatively similar impact. Unfortunately, donor bias, rather than effectiveness, often determines funding decisions. This disparity limits the growth of African-led solutions and reinforces dependency on external leadership and funding. To foster sustainable development, we should prioritise equipping and resourcing African leaders who have the cultural insight, relationships, and long-term commitment needed to drive lasting transformation.

From a stewardship perspective, we all long to see the 30, 60, or 100-fold return (Mark 4:20) on the vast sowing that has taken place on the continent. For this to happen, we must carefully apply our minds to the African socio-economic circumstances; they are both nuanced and multi-faceted. Neither a dependency from Africans receiving funding nor a power-based giving of Westerners is God-glorifying. Let us look for a better way.

Positive aspects of Western funding

Financial resources

Western funding provides essential financial resources to address pressing issues in Africa, such as alleviating poverty, providing better healthcare and education, and developing infrastructure. From a missions perspective these financial resources also help to translate and distribute Bibles, support church planters, build training centres, and increase the reach of gospel witness.

Capacity building

Western funding supports initiatives that strengthen organisations, build much-needed capacity, and develop essential work-related skills. Training programmes, technical assistance, and knowledge exchange initiatives empower Christian leaders, professionals, and organisations to tackle their own socio-economic challenges effectively.

Technology and expertise

Western donors bring valuable technological expertise, international best practices and innovation to African projects. This enables better healthcare, education, agriculture and information technology, and can significantly improve the quality of life and productivity in African communities.

Perspective and creativity

Outside perspective can be healthy to help think through alternate ideas and bring creativity. Environments that struggle oftentimes lack creative problem-solving abilities. They often just ‘can’t see what they can’t see.’ Fresh perspective is valuable – especially when it comes through question asking rather than through a directed ‘telling’ approach. Recognising the need for participatory, community-led approaches can lead to new development models. These should always emphasise partnership and collaboration between Western support and African stakeholders, giving priority to local agency and leadership.

Potential pitfalls of Western funding

Despite these positive aspects, there are potential pitfalls of Western funding, including:

Dependency and power dynamics

Too often, Westerners approach ministry environments thinking that ‘they are the ones in the know’ and are ministering to ‘those who don’t know.’ Instead of fostering dependency and perpetuating power imbalances, donors should make every effort to empower local communities to be agents of change in their own growth, leading to sustainable long-term outcomes. There was one project that ran for 20 years in an African country without prioritising local empowerment, costing a US donor millions of dollars, but falling flat when the donor finally pulled out. Twenty years of wasted effort that only resulted in further dependency.

Imposition of Western priorities

Western funders often prioritise interventions aligning with their own cultural and theological (and sometimes even national!) interests rather than addressing the most pressing needs identified by African communities themselves. This misalignment reduces the effectiveness and sustainability of funded projects, and can create resentment when interfering with national sovereignty.

One-size-fits-all approach

Western funders often apply standardised approaches based on their experiences without adequately considering the diversity of African contexts. This results in ineffective interventions that disregard local knowledge, cultural practices, needs and systemic factors. Capacity building is often initiated as a formula rather than serving the unique and specific needs of ministries. From our understanding on the ground, capacity building needs vary from region to region and should never be applied in an oversimplified way.

Lack of cultural sensitivity

Insufficient understanding of local traditions, languages and 'unwritten rules' often leads to culturally insensitive approaches. Without humility and an intentional effort to overcome blind spots, donors might implement projects that face resistance or dispassionate implementation by local leaders, wasting valuable resources and efforts. It would not be an understatement to say that there is a rising awareness of the negative effects of cultural mismatches of Western funding from African recipients. This is not honouring to either party as funding is sorely needed and Western donors have the best of intentions to be helpful agents of change.

Short-termism and project funding philosophy

Short funding cycles and project timelines may not align with the long-term nature of development challenges in Africa. Focussing on immediate, measurable outcomes can come at the expense of complex, systemic changes needed for sustainable change. Recognising that meaningful change takes time and perseverance, providing ongoing support, monitoring and evaluation is essential for fostering self-reliance within communities. Projects are often helpful instruments to get to know and trust one another, but ongoing short-term funding can only disempower and become counterproductive towards solving large systemic problems.

Poor implementation of donor projects

Africa is not known for its effective implementation of development projects. Various studies have explored the lack of effective aid delivery mechanisms, showing that a substantial portion of funding is often lost to inefficiencies, corruption, intermediaries and other administrative overheads in contexts with weak governance. In the Christian funding environment, it can be exactly the same. Any ignorant or uninformed funding can easily be wasted. Utilising trusted local partnerships works very well to get closer to the ground and remain informed, even to have line of sight of the rollout of projects.

Anecdotal insights for the West from interviewing ministry leaders from the continent

After several interviews with seasoned leaders from across the region, a few insights stood out that could help Western funders to support the work in the region more strategically and effectively.

There is huge appreciation for the partnership with Western funders and an acknowledgment that this partnership is crucial to advance the kingdom of God. However, it also became clear that uninformed giving (often unintentional) can do more harm than good. Sound advice from local leaders in the region that help inform and shape giving in the region for the advancement of God's kingdom include:

Be aware of worldview bias

We all have our biases due to our specific worldviews. It is critical to be aware of our own worldview and that of the context that we aim to serve. Trust is often sacrificed when we want to impose our way of seeing the world onto that of those we want to support. It builds trust to take time to understand why people within a specific context approach their challenges and opportunities in the way that they do.

Be present and listen well

There is no substitute for face-to-face interaction and learning. Regular field visits and building long-term trust relationships is of key importance for kingdom partnership. This is unfortunately a time-intensive and high-capacity investment, but it will yield greater fruit over the long term.

Hold lightly onto your strategy and resources

When we are present to listen well, we will soon realise that our intended strategy may not be able to be duplicated without contextual adjustments. A willingness to allow local leaders to help contextually adjust and shape programmes will establish deeper trust and lead to bigger impact.

We do not have to compromise the integrity of our content, but we need to be wise in the application of it. Our content will most easily be received in an honour / shame or power / fear worldview, but most probably not applied with the enthusiasm and commitment that we expect.

Authentic contextualisation

Contextualisation of resources need to be an authentic process. Western figureheads with subtitles or videos with voice-overs are mostly not effective. It may also communicate a certain amount of dishonour to local and capable leaders. Part of our listening and learning process should be focussed on identifying the right people of stature and respectability who can deliver content in the local language and context.

Diminish the power gap

There is a constantly perceived power dynamic. However, through the lens of the honour / shame or power / fear worldview, those who have the power should be respected, and one should do everything possible to meet their needs. Even if unintended, this can easily distort the funding relationship - turning it into one where the funder calls all the shots, and the ministry partner carries out the funder's agenda. True partnership is equal partnership, and we should also acknowledge the fact that the ministry partner knows their context best and has the necessary expertise.

Our funding should never put us in a position where we determine what partners should or should not do. Walking the journey together as equal partners is not only a wonderful testimony but helps both partners to be accountable stewards of what God has placed in their hands.

See people, not only numbers

Leaders in the region live in dire, ever-changing circumstances. They are often traumatised, burnt out or looking for a way out. An important responsibility of a funder is to not put more pressure on leaders. Our presence, support and encouragement are often worth much more than our financial contributions. This is especially true for emerging leaders who often do not even get the support they need from older leaders. Leaders and their teams hold face-to-face visits in high regard because it makes them feel seen. Our experience is that this approach often facilitates deeper trust and vulnerability and sends funders home with a better understanding of the context and its unique complexities.

CONCLUSION

Western funding plays a crucial role in addressing Africa's many socio-economic challenges, and will probably continue to do so for decades to come. Yet, if we expect local communities to adapt and learn through these various interventions, we should expect the same of ourselves.

Our hope is that what we are investing into today will be what we will reap great fruitfulness from in the decade to come. Funders would do well to approach all kingdom projects with humility, respect, and a willingness to learn from local perspectives and experiences. In the words of Paul in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." Collaborative, context-specific, and culturally sensitive approaches are key to maximising the positive impact of Western assistance and promoting sustainable growth of the church in Africa.



What follows is an insert from Dr Nancy Wanjiku Njagi, the Africa Director of Local Leaders International, who for more than 20 years has been doing excellent work in training Christian leaders for effective ministry in their own culture.

“Let me tell you the story of a church located in Mashimoni village, in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. This is an indigenously instituted Pentecostal church located right in the heart of the slum. The local pastor benefited from training that equipped him with skills and knowledge – he grasped all he could from the training, and transferred the knowledge to the pastoral team.

The church then started a Sunday feeding programme for children within the slum. It attracted many children to the church, and created a chance for the Sunday School teachers to interact with the children and identify their needs. They also carried out other checks such as impromptu home visits. From this, a community school with a feeding programme was established within the church premise, with school from Monday to Friday and church programmes on Saturday and Sunday. The congregation’s offering was used to pay rent for the premise, pay the teachers, and feed the children. The school also admitted some children who would pay fees, thus subsidising costs. This often happens within slum communities – a local church reaching out to needy families and their children by offering education and spiritual nourishment.

Then comes the part of the story where a foreigner visits the slum, is overwhelmed by the need, takes pictures to share with their church back home, and persuades them to ‘adopt’ this slum church and school in Kibera. Which is exactly what happened to our church and school in Mashimoni village. The foreign church generously decided to take over all the financial responsibilities of the school – including giving the teachers a pay rise and purchasing some structures for future construction projects. All good intentions, and indeed, the school thrived and was well-regarded within the slum community.

Until the ‘adoption relationship’ with the foreign church came to an end after ten years, and the external funding stopped. This was in the name of ‘responsible development’ – but was it responsible? Or was it just the end of a feel-good project?

This school that was making such a difference in the community had to shut down, and the church congregation fell apart after the foreign church pulled out its support. Of course there could have been other factors that caused the closure, but weren’t the church and school thriving before the injection of external resources? What happened in the process? What gaps did the external resources meet, and what new problems did the external resources create?

When funding is not carefully thought through, these external resources rob people in Africa of their communal responsibility to care for one another. The flooding of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Kibera, for instance, has resulted in residents feeling entitled. They say that, ‘after all, the organisations raised the resources in the name of Kibera residents and therefore the money they raise belongs to us.’

The residents could be right, but their drive to push a little harder through life is lost because they know that a certain NGO will feed and pay school fees for their children, and provide other free services. Self-drive and concern for neighbour is lost – and is left to the outsider who comes in the form of a donor-funded organisation. I am always of the opinion that help from the neighbour should be the first option before seeking help from across continents. After all, in Africa, my neighbour's children are my children!

Another unfortunate reality is that it is the 'middle classes' of the slum who benefit from resources available, and the people who really need immediate rescue are not often reached. The middle class are not information poor and thus aware of the programs that various organisations offer. While the organisations think they are doing much, they are just reaching the same people most of the time and leaving out those who really are in great need of help.

So big question therefore is, how can we fund better into Africa?

To address this dilemma, I refer to what I call the 'outsider toolkit,' which brings to the fore the various paradoxes that may present themselves when an outsider, consultant, or external organisation seeks to serve in a context outside their own. Allow me to bullet the paradoxes as follows:

- *Having a deficiency attitude versus knowing that God is at work in every community and is still in the business of creating. Our attitudes towards a community will determine how the community receives us.*
- *Seeking to modernise communities versus empowering communities to determine the destiny of their lives.*
- *Presenting your ideas versus seeking for locally appropriate input to local situations.*
- *Going for quick fixes versus taking the long route towards developing sustainable models.*
- *Preferring external versus local sources of information. What is our source of information with regards to the communities in which we serve?*

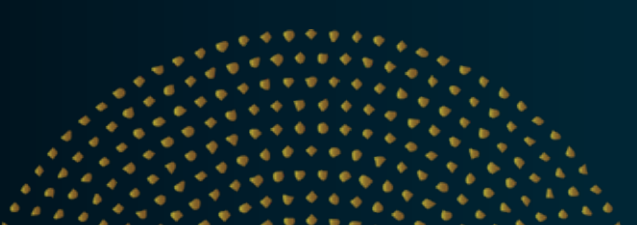
I have found that being present is one of the most effective ways to address the five paradoxes mentioned above. By 'being present' I mean interacting with the people in the community, literally having them in your face, and continually keeping them in your heart. This reduces an outsider's ignorance and prejudice, and replaces it with an understanding of God's purpose for the people in the community.

Our aim should be to train African leaders whose mission is to enable thriving African communities. Leaders who do not first look to external resources, but instead ask themselves: how can we do this ourselves, what resources do we have that can address this concern, can we take the first ten steps before reaching outside our community? What is the role of the local church? How can we love our neighbour through the use of our own generated resources? Africa needs such leaders."



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*When funding is not carefully thought through,
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one another.*



6.2 THE NEED FOR MARKETPLACE MINISTRY IN DISCIPLING AFRICA

The consequences of dualism

How often do we come across the worldview that church ministry is seen as spiritual, while secular work isn't? That being a missionary or a pastor is 'a calling from God,' while being an engineer or a security guard is... just a job? And that those who 'just have jobs' should find other ways of glorifying God or being useful in the kingdom – like serving on the worship team at church or going on mission?

While this dualistic worldview (which divides everything into secular or sacred categories) is found across the world, it has had significant consequences on the African continent – from providing fertile ground for the prosperity gospel, to a widespread lack of economic and social progress. As Sibs Sibanda of Resource Global explains, "African society is not (in general) organised, productive, efficient, and prosperous. And why is this? In part because as believers, the 'good works' we look to excel in are 'spiritual' or 'church' things, like attending all-day healing services and all-night prayer meetings. We are legalistic about what we view as sacred, but indifferent to what we view as secular, like our work and public life. This is not to say that African Christians are lazy – it's more that there is often no cognitive integration between our faith and our work."

As an extreme expression of this dualistic worldview, many Christians have retreated from business, entertainment, politics or law because those industries are seen as 'worldly,' or even condemned as 'evil' – which means that the most powerful forces shaping the future of nations are often devoid of the salt and light of Christian influence.

Sibanda continues, "As long as Christians believe that some things are sacred to God and other things are not – we may see many more churches springing up, but we certainly will not see African society transformed by the gospel. Joining the dots between God's purposes and the daily work of the believer is perhaps the single biggest omission of the contemporary church – which, centuries after the Reformation, is a profound mystery and shame."

It is our firm belief therefore that the church in Africa will not reach its full potential without being disciplined into a restored understanding of marketplace calling.

Seeing regular work as divine calling

In the African context, a local church is often the central pillar of the community. The church is therefore uniquely positioned to bring positive change to the economic and social realities of that community, by equipping Christians to practically live out their faith in their workplaces. This does not refer to replicating the rituals of church life (such as prayer meetings) at work, but to bringing about a dynamic change to the way Christians view the substance of work itself. For example, how does God actually answer our prayer, "Give us today our daily bread?" How can we enjoy food, unless farmers cultivate crops? How can that 'bread' reach us in an urban setting without the supporting industries such as banking, insurance, law, transportation, and retail?

Marketplace ministry is instrumental in restoring the revelation that work is not a necessary evil that came into the world because of sin. From the beginning God commanded work as a blessing to us: “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion’” (Genesis 1:28). In her book *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey explains that the command “to multiply” includes the responsibility to develop the social world, and the command to “subdue the earth” includes the capacity to harness the resources of the natural world – for the sake of building flourishing communities.

When Christians embrace this biblical view of faith and work, it breaks the illusion that only religious activities have spiritual significance. And once we realise that all work is spiritual, it becomes clear that ordinary, regular work can of course be a divine calling.

The potential impact of marketplace ministry

At the Lausanne 2024 conference, one of the strong themes that emerged was the importance of the workplace as the next mission frontier. This, combined with the recognition of the importance of disciple-making, means that the body of Christ has a huge opportunity in turning its attention towards the work environment. In our view marketplace ministry recognises that the majority of Christians spend most of their time at work, and helps them to see their work as an extension of their worship – encouraging ethical practices, diligence, and creativity.

The potential impact of marketplace ministry therefore goes far beyond representing a vast mission field where Christians interact with those who might never attend church. It can be an incredibly effective approach to:

- *Restore the dignity of work:* In contexts where certain jobs may be undervalued or stigmatised, Christians can find purpose and dignity in their work, knowing it serves both their communities and God’s kingdom. This promotes a healthy self-respect through honest labour.
- *Address ethical and societal challenges:* Africa’s marketplace is frequently marred by systemic issues such as corruption, exploitation, and economic inequality – which hinder development and perpetuate injustice. Marketplace ministry equips Christians to confront these issues by promoting integrity, accountability, and excellence.
- *Serve the common good:* Work enables people to express their God-given creativity while earning a living and serving others, as practical expressions of ‘loving your neighbour’ (Mark 12:31) and ‘doing all things unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23–24). The marketplace allows for the exchange of essential resources between villages, towns, cities, nations and continents – for the sake of all people.
- *Emphasise the priesthood of all believers:* Marketplace ministry empowers lay Christians to take active roles in discipleship. In Africa, where access to formal theological training is often limited, this approach decentralises ministry, allowing professionals, entrepreneurs, and artisans to disciple others within their spheres of influence, adding tremendous growth to the kingdom of God.



Suggested strategies for implementing marketplace ministry

To implement marketplace ministry effectively, the African church and other organisations need to start with the training of church leaders themselves. Without a deep understanding of the biblical integration of faith and work, pastors will continue to commit ‘pastoral malpractice,’ in the words of Tom Nelson, a senior pastor for more than 30 years and founder of Made to Flourish. He confessed, “I was discipling my church for the minority of their lives, not the majority.” This is true for too many pastors and Christian leaders around the world – the focus of discipleship has been limited to personal piety and more vigorous church involvement, and has little to do with being salt and light in a broken world.

As Leslie Newbegin points out in his book *Truth to Tell – The Gospel as Public Truth*, Christians in the marketplace are essentially “undercover agents.” He goes on to explain: “Undercover agents need a great deal of skill. We do not spend enough of our energies in training undercover agents... What would be the specific kind of training for a teacher in the public schools, for an executive in a big corporation, for a lawyer or a civil servant? Do we not need to invest much more of the church’s resources in creating the possibility for such training?”

Other suggested strategies include:

- *Networking opportunities*: Creating platforms for Christian professionals to connect, share experiences, and encourage one another.
- *Mentorship*: Pairing experienced Christian professionals with younger believers to guide them in integrating faith and work.
- *Advocacy*: Promoting policies and practices that reflect Christian values in the workplace.
- *Training programmes*: Equipping every Christian with biblical teachings on work ethics, leadership, and evangelism in the workplace.

Sibanda recalls a recent example from one such training programme whose target audience is professionals aged between 25 and 35. “One of the cohort members was a metro police officer whose primary job was to guard electrical installations in a township. When he joined the programme, he was open about how much he hated his job because people in the community looked down on him and called him a security guard. I asked him what would happen if he didn’t pitch up for work, or did his job badly. He replied that cables would be stolen, the community would be in darkness, and crime would spike. I then asked him whose job it was ultimately to protect people. After some thought, he said that surely it must be God’s. Then I asked him how God does that – and he joined the dots.”

“About four months into the programme, I asked the group to share how what they were learning was impacting their approach to work. This young man said that he’d been setting his alarm clock half an hour earlier so that he could get to work on time every day (he’d always been late before because he felt so demotivated). When I asked him why, he said that it was part of his worship of God and his obedience to the Great Commandment to love his colleagues and community. My first thought? Isn’t this the Africa we want?”

CONCLUSION

Marketplace ministry represents a pivotal opportunity for the church in Africa to disciple Christians into an integrated understanding of faith and work. By dismantling the sacred-secular divide and restoring a revelation of regular work as part of God’s work, marketplace ministry can raise up a generation of Christians who embody integrity, creativity, and excellence – fulfilling the vision of a society transformed by the gospel in both word and deed.

We thank Sibs Sibanda and Lise-Marie Keyser for their meaningful contributions to this section on the need for marketplace ministry in discipling Africa.





CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There is a lot in this report on Africa, the continent that we are deeply passionate about. We have tried to highlight the important themes and dynamics at play and offer some suggestions about how we can do what we all want to do, better.

We have loved the process of listening and gaining valuable insights from wise leaders on the continent. There have been many contributors to this report, each voice adding much richness to the dialogue.

If you have read through this report you most likely have had your heart moved by God to see meaningful and lasting change. Lasting change does not come easily – we often ask the question: how would you live differently if you knew Jesus was returning tomorrow? At the end of this report we want to ask you a different question, maybe more relevant for the work you are doing: how would you build differently if you knew Jesus was coming back in 100 years?

For too long the church has inadvertently fostered short-term thinking and this has impacted how we think and build in all spheres of society. As kingdom people we generally do not build sustainable environments that consider 100-year generational growth and impact.

Africa needs us to begin thinking this way.

As Aldo Leopold once said, “The oldest task in human history is to live on a piece of land without spoiling it.” So much has been spoiled, robbed and destroyed. If the body of Christ truly understood our original Genesis mandate, we would know the importance of *stewarding well* what has been given to us, of *creating beauty* because beauty makes the soul come alive, and of *building sustainability* into everything we do. Any aid, funding or help we give should prioritise these three elements for the sake of those that we are walking alongside.

Good *stewardship* pushes us towards building lasting environments for human thriving. This also includes physical spaces. The gospel is not only about human hearts but it’s about places, about creation. God planted a garden and put man there to tend it. He models for us how to cultivate environments. ‘Gardens’ act as Christian presence and shape culture over decades, sometimes centuries.

Beauty is a word that is often on the opposite side of the sacrifice of mission. Sacrifice implies hardship and suffering for Jesus. Sacrifice is ugly. Painful. And it is right because Jesus did it for us. But that is also only half the story. No-one, no community wants to live in constant sacrifice. Humans thrive in beauty. We come alive in awe when we take in the thunder of Vic Falls, or look up at Table Mountain or Kilimanjaro... All good things in creation are staircases that lead us upwards to the sight of God. Beauty is the most attractive force – it is why we are captivated by the idea of God's glory. Every true act of worship is an exercise in amazement, beholding beauty.

What does Africa look like in 25 years? Our responsibility is to raise up leaders and communities with greater intentionality, because in 25 years you won't be here doing what you're doing. They will. You'd probably take greater care when sowing the seeds of vision or funding, to drive character deeper into the soil of human hearts so that the rootedness of God's generational, redemptive plan remains firm.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Please note: *This publication brings together diverse perspectives from multiple authors, each contributing unique insights. As a multi-author project, the respective contributors may not fully agree with every opinion or perspective expressed.*

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Let us do it with the utmost care
and dedication.*

