

THE CHURCH IN AFRICA *In the Twenty-First Century:* **Characteristics, Challenges and** **Opportunities**

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The following article is based on the keynote address given by Rev. Dr. Danny McCain at the Heinrich Kramer Institute Consultation on Church and Society, Jos, Nigeria, on 11th May 1999. On the basis of church developments within the last few decades of the 20th century, McCain projects into the future to describe the characteristics, challenges and opportunities of the church in Africa in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Apart from God, no one knows the future with any degree of absolute certainty. In biblical times God raised up prophets who most often had a message for their contemporary world but who would often also make authoritative predictions about the future. I am not a prophet so I can not claim to have any divine revelation about the church in Africa in the twenty-first century. However, a careful observer can make certain predictions about the future based upon the record of the past.

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No one has ever been in the twenty-first century before. However, based upon the history of the church in the twentieth century and particularly on the last decade or two of the twentieth century, we can make certain projections about what the church is going to look like in the twenty-first century. The things about which we can be most certain are the things that are likely to take place in the early part of the twenty-first century. Our current conditions anticipate that quite well. However, the further we get beyond the twentieth century the more speculative our predictions will be.

Before I make my observations about the church in the twenty-first century, I will make two preliminary qualifications. First, although I have travelled in other parts of Africa, my experience of Africa has largely been in West Africa and particularly Nigeria. So while my observations may often fit the continent as a whole, at times they may seem more particular to the West African context. And in any case I will draw most of my examples from the part of Africa with which I am most familiar. Secondly, my observations are primarily limited to the Protestant churches. Although I have regular contact on a personal and professional basis with Roman Catholics, the comments following primarily refer to Protestant Christianity in Africa.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The African Church in the twenty-first century, like all churches, will have certain characteristics. I suggest that the African Church will develop the following characteristics.

Bigger

At the beginning of the twentieth century it was estimated that about three percent of the people on the African continent professed to be Christians. The twentieth century has been remarkably successful for Christianity so that at the beginning of the twenty-

first century, almost fifty percent of the people in Africa claim to be Christians. The last two decades of the twentieth century have seen a great explosion of Christian activity and Christian growth.

One example will be sufficient. The Baptist Mission began its work in the south-west part of Nigeria. It only moved to the north in the second part of the century. Most of the Baptist churches in the northern part of Nigeria prior to that time were planted by and for the Yoruba traders who lived in the north. However, during the last forty years, the Baptist Church has experienced tremendous growth among the northern indigents. For example, in 1972, Rev. Andrew Auta went to Lafia in the present Nasarawa State to start a Baptist Church. There were no Baptists in the town at that time. He has been there for the past twenty-eight years. At the present time, his church has 1400 people in the Hausa service and another 300 in the English service every Sunday. In addition, his church has planted four other Baptist churches in the city of Lafia and 52 Baptist churches in the Lafia Local Government Area.¹ This is remarkable growth.

Pentecostal churches have experienced even greater growth. The Assemblies of God Church has made serious advances in northern Nigeria and the Deeper Life has grown from being a Bible study in the 1960's to a movement in the 1970's to a strong church in the 1980's. In the last twenty years, it has grown to be one of the largest churches in Nigeria.²

There is every reason to believe that the church will continue to grow in the first few decades of the next century. I project that most of the remaining pagan areas in Africa will yield to Christianity within the next twenty-five years. In addition, I believe that there is going to be slow but steady progress of the church among Muslims. The net result is going to be a church that continues to grow and prosper in the twenty-first century.

¹ Rev. Auta is a former student of mine. This data comes from personal conversations from him.

² It must be observed that at least some of the Pentecostal growth and probably most of the Deeper Life growth has come from second and third generation Christians.

Younger

It has usually been the younger people of any society who have embraced new things including new religions. However, after Christianity has become a part of the culture, many times the young people become interested in other 'new things' and the average membership of the church becomes older and older.³ However, the remarkable thing about the church in Africa is that most of the growth in the church during the last two decades is from the younger generation. This is especially true in the Pentecostal churches. If one attends a meeting of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), he will observe that most of the pastors are under forty years of age. In addition, when one attends many of the 'living churches'⁴ in Nigeria and West Africa, he will discover that most of those in the congregation are much younger than a comparable church in the West.

There is no reason this trend is going to change. At least for the first few decades of the twenty-first century, the church in Africa is going to continue to be a young church. The youthful nature of the church will continue to give to it much energy and enthusiasm. It will enable the church to have the strength to continue to evangelise and impact the society. However, it will also make the church more susceptible to fanaticism, intolerance and unwise decisions.

More African

The church in Africa was planted largely by European missionaries or those who were trained and heavily influenced by western missionaries.⁵ Therefore, the church in Africa took upon

³ I read an article some years ago entitled, "The Greying of the Church in America". The thesis of that article was that the church in America is getting older and older. I suspect that this is also true in most other places.

⁴ The term 'living church' is often associated with Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and West Africa.

⁵ Much of the mission work in West Africa was done by blacks from the West Indies. Perhaps the most outstanding missionary was an African, Bishop Ajai Crowther, who was rescued from slavery and given the best western education.

itself a distinctively Western flavour though this has not been without exceptions. African church leaders like William Wade Harris in Ivory Coast and Garrick Braide in Nigeria were distinctively African in their ministry. The Ethiopian movement in South Africa and the Aladura movement in Nigeria were based upon a much more African than European ecclesiology. However, the fact is that the main Christian denominations and churches in Africa throughout most of the twentieth century have been similar in many ways to their European parent churches. They sing the same hymns. They worship in the same way. Their ministers wear the same ecclesiastical clothing. The structure of the services has been very similar. The ecclesiastical hierarchy is about the same. In fact, if one came from a Baptist church in America and visited a Baptist church in Ogbomoso, Nigeria, he would feel basically at home.

However, during the last two decades of the twentieth century that has started to change. The entire African church is becoming much more African. The singing of western hymns is being replaced by singing African choruses. Africans are expressing their worship and praise to God in much more African ways. Churches which were very rigid and western in their styles of worship are much more open to physical and emotional expressions than a generation ago.⁶ Allowing African instruments and dancing in the church was frowned on for many years. However, these practices are being commonly accepted in most of the churches today.

If the last decade is any indicator, the church in the twenty-first century is going to reflect much more of an African flavour than the church in the twentieth century. We are going to see more and more freedom of expression in church services. We are going to see

⁶ The Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) is a good example. Only ten years ago, it would have been very inappropriate for church members to raise their hands in worship or to allow African instruments in a church service. However, this more emotional style of worship is common-place now in many ECWA churches.

a more African style of leadership in the church.⁷ We are going to see more distinctively African styles of preaching with more emphasis on story telling and parables than on exposition and logic. The direction of the church in Africa today is toward becoming more African. That tendency is going to continue well into the twenty-first century.

More Lively

One of the growing influences within the African church during the last two decades has been Pentecostalism. Pentecostal phenomenon first entered the church through the Zionist movement in South Africa during the second decade of the twentieth century.⁸ In addition, the Aladura movement which developed in Nigeria in the third decade of the twentieth century had distinctively Pentecostal characteristics including a stress on supernatural healing, dreams, visions, prophesy and the speaking in tongues. The Assemblies of God were invited to come into Nigeria in the 1940's to nurture a budding Pentecostal movement. The Assemblies of God Church has grown rapidly during the last fifty years and is now one of the leading Christian denominations in Nigeria.

However, the real growth of Pentecostalism in Africa has taken place during the last thirty years. Immediately after the Nigerian civil war, there was an explosion of interest in Christianity. This began as a movement primarily in universities among young people. Out of the movement have grown the leading Pentecostal churches today including the Church of God Mission, and the

⁷ Many of the independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria already reflect the more authoritative structure of leadership that is characteristic of traditional African society. These founders of ministries function much like chiefs in a local village. There is little democracy in their organisations though they are open to the wise counsel of elders whom they respect.

⁸ Jonathan Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa*, Africa Christian Press, Ghana 1981, p. 222.

Deeper Life Bible Church.⁹ Pentecostalism which was once a movement among the lower classes of people has lost that distinctive and has entered the mainstream of African society. More and more Pentecostals are occupying positions in university religion departments and as officers of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).¹⁰

One of the reasons that Pentecostalism has been received so well in Africa is because many of the basic tenants of Pentecostalism are very consistent with the African worldview. These include:

1. *The Supernatural*

Much of western Christianity has been heavily influenced by an anti-supernatural bias which has tended to lower (if not remove) the emphasis on the supernatural in western churches. This emphasis in the west has been reflected to some extent in the mainstream African churches. However, the supernatural is a very basic part of the traditional African worldview. Therefore, when Pentecostalism came along offering a Biblical version of the supernatural, it was very appealing and quickly adopted by many African Christians.

2. *Demons/Evil Spirits*

Nearly all African traditional religion has believed strongly in the existence of various kinds of evil spirits. These spirits influence human life in many ways. However, the western world under the influence of rationalism has largely rejected the spiritual world, at least in practice if not in theory. This has had some impact upon

⁹ These two churches are probably the largest of the newer Pentecostal groups and would also be the largest indigenous churches in Nigeria. However, other groups like the Greater Evangelism World Crusade, Redeemed People's Mission and hundreds of independent Pentecostal churches are growing rapidly and having more and more influence in the Christian world.

¹⁰ CAN is a coalition of Christian churches and denominations which was formed in Nigeria to interact with the government on issues that relate to religion and Christianity in Nigeria. It has enabled Christians from all traditions to speak to the government with one voice primarily in opposition to a government that has been perceived as being pro-Islam.

the western church. Though many of the western churches would not deny theologically the existence of demons, they have little understanding and experience with the demonic world. Therefore, there is little if any stress on this phenomenon in their churches. However, Pentecostalism has taken a much more literal interpretation of the teachings of the Bible about demons. Confronting demons and casting out demons has become a major emphasis within Pentecostalism around the world. When Pentecostalism came to Africa, it gave a solid theological blessing to the already existing African recognition of the world of spirits. Therefore, it was quickly embraced. Resisting demons and casting out demons is now a regular part of many Pentecostal church services in Africa and many of the non-Pentecostal church services as well.

3. Divine Healing

Although the traditional African healers used herbs and other natural remedies in their healing process, they almost always utilised spiritual or supernatural practices as well. Healing was something which the spirits had to be involved in. Again, much of the western church, though accepting the miracles of Jesus, have been so influenced by the scientific approach to life that few people expect supernatural healing to take place. Because the child learns from the parent, this has caused a corresponding lack of expectation of the supernatural in Africa. However, Pentecostalism came along stressing that we can expect and experience miracles today of the same nature as the miracles of the biblical day. Since miraculous healing has always been an important part of African traditional beliefs, it was a natural thing to embrace Pentecostalism which believed also in supernatural healing.

4. Emotional and Physical Expressions of Worship

Africans express their emotions through singing and dancing and other physical means of expression. The western world tends to be less emotional and much more reserved in their private and public life. This carried over into the churches which Western missionaries planted in Africa. The typical Anglican or

Presbyterian or Methodist church service in Lagos or Nairobi or Kampala in the past has included choirs wearing robes and singing anthems accompanied by organ music, a type of worship which was characteristic of the middle and upper classes in Europe and America. However, Pentecostalism was at first a movement of the lower classes. As such it encouraged people to express their worship and praise to God in whatever way they felt would be meaningful. Hence Pentecostalism has tended to be much more loud and boisterous in its worship than most of the mainstream churches. When Pentecostalism entered Nigeria in the seventies in a very big way, it found an audience which was ready for the message of free expressions in worship. Africans have always clapped and danced and been comfortably boisterous in their celebrations. Pentecostalism demonstrated that this same kind of physical and emotional expression was legitimate in church.

Pentecostalism has not only influenced Africa through creating Pentecostal churches and denominations. It has influenced nearly all churches today. Twenty years ago, most of the mainline churches attempted to resist the influence of Pentecostalism by denouncing speaking in tongues, forbidding members to dance in the church and denying the miracles which were claimed in the Pentecostal churches. However, most churches today, including the Catholic church, have taken up many of the Pentecostal ways. Their services are much louder and more emotional. There is less anti-tongues speaking rhetoric. More and more mainline churches are stressing supernatural healing. It is undeniable that Pentecostalism has had a very profound effect upon the Christian church during the last few decades.

Since this is true, it is likely that Pentecostalism is going to have more and more influence on the church in Africa in the twenty-first century. The church is going to be louder with more and more freedom to express worship and praise to God in a distinctively African manner.

Softer

Christianity has been a male-dominated religion all throughout its history. Women were excluded from the priesthood in the Old

Testament and also from positions of leadership with only a few exceptions. In the New Testament Paul refused to allow women to have positions of leadership or instruction (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-15). The fact that women have been excluded from leadership in the church is not necessarily a criticism because the church has simply been a reflection of the society as a whole which has been male-dominated.¹¹ The western missionaries who planted the church in Africa found a culture that was equally as male-dominated as the European culture. With these influences there is little wonder that the African church throughout the twentieth century has largely been a male-dominated entity.

However, the last quarter of the twentieth century has brought remarkable changes to the world with regards to the place of women in society. In most western countries, women are equally as well educated as men and have been able to enter into nearly all job markets including the military and politics. Several nations have had women as their heads of state during the last few decades including Israel, the United Kingdom and even a conservative country like Pakistan. In addition, women have made great strides in the church as well. Many denominations which had reserved positions of leadership only to men have changed their rules to allow for the ordination of women.¹²

This phenomenon is also slowly penetrating the African church as well. Women are beginning to occupy positions which have been reserved for men. The University of Jos employed the first women lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies during the 1990's.

¹¹ It can be argued that Christianity has been in the forefront of elevating the status of women in society. Christianity recognised the inherent equality of all persons and this truth has slowly influenced society over the last century.

¹² Most Pentecostal churches and some of the mainstream churches like the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria and the United Methodist Church have opened its doors to women clergy. However, the Anglican Church and most of the evangelical churches, though allowing more and more positions of leadership for women, have resisted the ordination of women. The Roman Catholic Church also continues to resist the ordination of women both in Africa and other parts of the world.

Women clergymen are becoming more and more common. In Nigeria in 1998 Archbishop Benson Idahosa died, leaving a vacuum in the leadership of the Church of God Mission which he had founded and led. To the surprise of many (and the dismay of not a few), it was his wife who took up the mantle of leadership. She appears to have been accepted by the church and the society at large.

These small indications of female leadership are only a foretaste of what the African church is going to experience in the twenty-first century. More and more women are going to become pastors. More seminaries are going to open their doors to female lecturers. African theologians in the future will come increasingly from both genders. Women will occupy leadership positions in their denominations and in theological institutions. The domination of the African church by men will be thoroughly broken in the twenty-first century. And with the ascension of women into leadership positions, the church will see a gentler and softer style of church leadership. The maternal instincts of women will make the church a more humane institution.

Brighter¹³

The Church in Africa has made amazing progress during the twentieth-century. It has grown from just a handful of training institutions to hundreds of seminaries, Bible colleges and other training institutions across the continent. These institutions have trained thousands of pastors who are ably serving the church today. The religion departments in African universities have produced some outstanding scholars. Unfortunately, even with this

¹³ I recognise that the term 'brighter' is often used as a synonym for 'more clever' or 'smarter', and may be viewed as having to do with intelligence rather than education. It is obvious that there are many people who are very clever or smart who are not well educated. Education does have a tendency to teach one how to think which, in one sense of the word, makes a person appear more intelligent. However, the major focus of this point is that the African church will be better educated in the twenty-first century.

remarkable progress. Africa lags behind the western world in the academic development of its pastors, church leaders and theological educators.

However, progress is being made. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, at least six major Protestant seminaries have started offering masters degrees in Nigeria¹⁴ in addition to those which are offered in the public universities. I estimate that at least twenty percent of the African staff of these institutions have studied abroad. More and more Africans are writing textbooks and other serious theological aids.¹⁵ Africans have distinguished themselves in Europe and America as students in the best seminaries and universities and many Africans are being invited to join the staffs of western institutions.

All of these things tell us that the African church in the twenty-first century is going to be much better educated. African scholars in the future are going to be less dependent upon Western institutions, books and academic research.¹⁶ They are going to be much more capable of doing serious exegesis and better able to challenge their people to think. The African church in the future is going to be brighter than the past.

¹⁴ These include: Jos Evangelical Theological Seminary, Jos; Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Bukuru; Igbaja Seminary, Igbaja; Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso; Wesley International Theological Seminary, Owerri; and Evangel Seminary, Jos.

¹⁵ Africa Christian Textbooks (ACTS) is an organisation which is encouraging and assisting Africans to produce serious scholarly works. Several books have already been produced by African scholars and several more are in the process.

¹⁶ This is not a call for a withdrawal of the African church from the rest of the world. In fact, because of advanced communication and especially because of the Internet, the world is becoming a much smaller place.

CHALLENGES OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As reflected above, the church in Africa in the twenty-first century has a bright future. However, the church will also face some serious challenges. The following is a sampling of some of the challenges which the church in Africa will face in the next century.

Growth without Mediocrity

As indicated above, the African Church in the twenty-first century will continue to grow and expand. However, there is a big challenge associated with that. It is a problem which has already seriously manifested itself in the twentieth century. The problem is numerical growth without a corresponding spiritual, intellectual and moral growth. The African Church has often been described as 'a mile wide and an inch deep'.¹⁷ There is much numerical growth. There is great enthusiasm in church services. Much money is donated to the church and religious causes. Christian terminology permeates one's conversation. Public prayers are a part of most public non-religious meetings. Hundreds of new church buildings are being built. People are anxious to take upon themselves religious titles. Even evangelism is practiced with enthusiasm and commitment.

However, in spite of all these positive features, Christianity has failed to halt the growing corruption in Africa. Though the ethical teachings of Jesus are at the heart of Christianity, the Church in Africa continues to be guilty of many of the kinds of corruption which characterise the society as a whole. Preaching is often loud and emotional but devoid of substance. Educational institutions have lower standards for the same academic degrees than their

¹⁷ The metric equivalent to this statement would be to say that the church is 'a kilometre wide and a centimetre deep'.

western counterparts.¹⁸ Even worship services often appeal to the more physical part of man's nature than the deeper spiritual part.

It is unfair to demand that the young African church exhibit all the marks of maturity that a much older and more experienced church would demonstrate. However, it is appropriate to warn that the Church in Africa must not become satisfied with the large numbers and spontaneous enthusiasm and genuine commitment and thus relax in its attempts to grow and develop. The African Church in the twenty-first century must continue to learn and grow. It must resist mediocrity with the same commitment that it resists compromise.

Enthusiasm without Fanaticism

As indicated above, the church is becoming more 'African' and more 'Pentecostal' which implies a greater stress on physical and emotional expressions and also a greater stress on phenomena. In fact, in many African churches today a service is not complete without a few prophecies, a healing or two, and a few demons cast out. Churches and ministries now compete with one another to come up with the most dramatic advertisements such as 'Divine Explosion,' 'Mountain of Miracles,' 'Supernatural Sensation' and similar expressions. Even the names of churches have to reflect this great emphasis on the supernatural with such names as 'Miracle Centre' and 'The Synagogue of the Supernatural'.

It is good to further develop an African flavour in the church, and it is good to preserve the enthusiasm and it is even good to stress the supernatural. However, miracles did not occur every day

¹⁸ For example, many of the PhD dissertations in Africa focus on comparative studies between some Biblical concept and the corresponding concept in an African ethnic group. Whereas this is a legitimate study, it borders more on sociology than theology. However, degrees in Biblical studies are awarded for this kind of research. Too many of the advanced degrees in Africa have only limited regional value and do not measure up to international standards for similar degrees.

in the Bible.¹⁹ Jesus lived for thirty years before ever performing a miracle. To build the church in Africa around the miraculous will lead to at least two problems. First, it will lead to a wrong emphasis. The commission of Jesus was to preach the gospel not to perform miracles. Even in Jesus' own ministry he worried about miracles diverting attention away from his real purpose for coming to this world. He often performed miracles in secret to avoid detracting attention from his teachings. Second, the overstress on miracles will lead to hypocrisy. If miracles are expected in every service, then "miracles" will take place every Sunday. However, these will be manipulated miracles, not the kind of miracles which Jesus performed.

The leaders of the Church in Africa must not yield to the temptation of expecting the miraculous in every service. To do so will lead to fanaticism and deviation from the truth.

Education without Rationalism

The education of the church is steadily improving in Africa. The Accrediting Council of Theological Educators in Africa (ACTEA) estimates that there are presently over two hundred Bible colleges and seminaries in Nigeria alone.²⁰ Many of the universities and most of the colleges of education have departments of religious studies which teach Christian studies. The academic study of Christianity is very much a part of the academic community in Africa.

One of the problems faced by African Christianity is the danger of being influenced by anti-supernatural rationalism like the western church has been. Starting with the 'Age of Reason', the western Church has gradually been more and more influenced by an anti-supernatural bias which arises from rationalism. This has

¹⁹ A careful study of the miracles in the Bible will reflect that there were 'seasons' of miracles. In other words, there were times throughout the Biblical history when miracles were being performed but there were other long periods of times when they were uncommon.

²⁰ This estimate is based upon a private conversation with the accreditation secretary of ACTEA, Dr. Scott Cunningham.

turned much of Christianity in the western world into a moral fraternity or an association of like-minded people who come together for fellowship. The Bible is often viewed as little more than a miscellaneous collection of religious meditations by pious men of the past. The Bible is primarily useful in showing the history and development of religion and has only limited value in the life of the modern world.

Africa does not have the problem with the anti-supernatural bias that is part of the western world. The African worldview presupposes the existence of God and His involvement in the lives of his people. Nearly all Africans accept the existence of the spiritual world and recognise the need to express their religious feelings. Unfortunately, as more Africans study in western institutions and read western theology books, they are becoming more and more influenced by this western anti-supernatural bias. It would be a mistake for the African church in the twenty-first century to loose or weaken its very strong belief in the spiritual world and in the supernatural.

This means that the African church must work harder at not only creating more theological institutions but developing an educated clergy and academic class who not only are committed to worship and service of God but are committed to the historic orthodox tenants of the faith. African leaders and scholars must refuse to yield to the pressure from the west to abandon their traditional beliefs in the supernatural.

Contextualization without Syncretism

Contextualization was a popular word in missiology twenty years ago. The word refers to the process of applying biblical principles to a particular cultural context. Biblical principles are unchanging. However, the application of those principles vary from culture to culture. For example, the Bible teaches children to honour their parents (Exodus 20:12). Regardless of what culture a person lives in, it is expected that he or she will demonstrate appropriate honour and respect for his or her parents. However, the application of this principle varies from culture to culture. In America to honour parents means to be polite to them and to obey them. In Africa it

means that but it also means that one bows appropriately to them. In Yoruba culture, respecting parents means that one prostrates before them. The principle is the same; the application is different.

Contextualization includes many different aspects of church life, including the style of worship services, kinds of church government, methods of evangelism and various lifestyle issues. In some cultures, drinking any kind of alcohol would be totally wrong whereas other cultures allow for the moderate drinking of alcohol. In Africa it is appropriate and even required in some churches for women to wear head coverings when they go to church, whereas in western culture this practice has been almost totally abandoned.

The revival of African culture in the church which has allowed traditional African instruments to be used is positive. However, there are also dangers associated with it. Many of the African independent churches have imported into the church such 'African' practices as polygamy and an overstress on visions and dreams. Other churches have given to angels the same status as the spirits who were the intermediaries between mankind and God. The recent militant attitude toward Muslims during religious crises in Northern Nigeria reflects more of a tribal warfare mentality than the non-violent teachings of Jesus. The African church must resist the temptation to go back so far to their roots that they abandon the principles of Christianity.

Majority Status without Domination

Christianity has either already become the majority religion in Africa or will achieve that status in the early part of the twenty-first century. One of the unfortunate tendencies within Christianity throughout church history is that whenever Christianity has achieved the majority status within a culture, it has become intolerant and sometimes abusive to other religions.²¹

The tribal and ethnic culture in Africa which encourages loyalty to one's own people and makes one suspicious of others has a

²¹ The period of the crusades is one of the low points of Christianity. The church sought through military means to spread or at least defend Christianity by destroying the church's enemies.

tendency to project that mentality into the church. In many parts of Africa, the Church has suffered under the domination of another religion. There are hundreds of testimonies in Northern Nigeria, the Sudan and other parts of Africa of Christians who have been persecuted, abused, and discriminated against simply because of their Christian faith.

The African Church in the twenty-first century must remember that religion is a voluntary thing. To violate the rights of others to express their worship as they choose is a violation of the very basic essence of Christianity. No one should ever be forced to become a Christian. Whenever Christians reach positions of authority in government and education and business, they must exercise the greatest discipline in making sure that the civil and religious rights of minority religions are protected. To do otherwise, is to turn Christianity into a "strong man" religion and to undermine the core teachings of Christianity. The fine line between evangelism and tolerance of other religions has been a tightrope which Christians have not always walked very well.

OPPORTUNITIES OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Not only will there be many challenges to the African church in the twenty-first century, there will also be many new opportunities. The following are a sampling.

The Most Christian Continent of the 21st Century

There is abundant evidence that Christianity is weakening in the Western World.²² In addition, there is just as much evidence that

²² This statement must be clarified. In some ways the church is stronger than ever. It has grown in conscience. It has awakened to its responsibilities to oppose ethnic and race and sex discrimination. It has awakened to its responsibilities toward the environment. Though it has grown somewhat self-centred, there are still remarkable examples of commitment toward world missions. The church is weakening in the sense that its numbers are decreasing and it is having less and less impact in the

the church in developing countries is growing rapidly. Some observers are projecting a gradual shift of the centre of Christianity from the west to the third world. As Christianity loses ground in Europe and America it is gaining ground in Africa and South America and other developing countries.

I believe that it is very likely that during the twenty-first century, the centre of Christian thought and activity will shift to the third world. The average Christian is going to become increasingly darker in complexion during the next century. The typical church building is likely to be much more simple than the cathedrals in Europe. The style of worship is going to be more a reflection of the people in developing countries than that of Europe and America. The names of Christian leaders in the future will sound more like Luis Palau and Desmond Tutu than Billy Graham and John Stott. With the current growth tendencies in Africa, when people around the world think about Christianity in the future, they will likely think of Africa.

World Leadership of Christianity

If the centre of Christianity shifts from the western world to developing countries, that means that the leadership of church is going to shift from the western world to the third world.²³ This has already been demonstrated to some extent during the last two decades of the twentieth century. For example a major congress on evangelism took place in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. However, the last three such congresses have taken place in the Philippines, Korea and South Africa.²⁴ This suggests that the world leadership

society as a whole. The rise of abortion rights in the western world is a case in point.

²³ A similar tendency is being observed in the leadership of the United Nations. Although that international body is still dominated somewhat by Western countries, the last two general secretaries have come from developing countries including Betros Betros Gali and Kofi Anan.

²⁴ At the Global Council on World Evangelism held in Pretoria, South Africa in 1997, over 4000 delegates from all over the world were present. The majority of them were from non-western nations and a large

of Christianity is already shifting away from the west into the rest of the world.

The world leadership of Christianity is going to become a major responsibility of the African church. Leadership is always difficult. The African church must arise to the occasion and prepare herself not only to complete the task of evangelising the rest of Africa but take upon herself the task of leading the rest of the Body of Christ through the twenty-first century.

Holistic Christianity

Christianity made remarkable progress in Africa in the twentieth century. The missionaries who were in Africa planting the church at the beginning of the twentieth century would be very happy with where the African church is today. However, as observed earlier, the church still has a long way to go before the basic principles of Christianity are firmly ingrained in the African Christian church.

One of the growing convictions of the church around the world is that Christianity must be understood as a holistic religion. Christianity is not just what one does on Sunday or what he or she does in his or her own private devotional life. Our Christianity must permeate every part of our lives and must penetrate every part of society. One of the greatest challenges to the African church in the twenty-first century is to recognise and implement this truth. The following are some of the most important principles that must be developed and inculcated into society.

1. *Emphasis on Justice*

One of the fundamental concepts of both Christianity and Judaism is the justice of God. The Psalmist declared, 'The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed' (Psalm 103:6; See also Zephaniah 3:5.). Jesus declared, 'By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgement is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me'. The Apostle Paul

percentage of the speakers and leaders were also from non-western countries.

declared, 'Now we know that God's judgement against those who do such things is based on truth'.

Justice is a theme that must receive more emphasis in the African church during the twenty-first century. A society can not be healthy without justice. A society will not be just unless justice is imbedded in its core values. The only way that a truth can become a core part of the society is through its religion. Therefore, the African Church must arise to the challenge and preach and teach and practice justice.

In 1995 a group of Nigerian leaders became concerned about the injustice and corruption in the Nigerian society. This led to the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria (COECEN) which took place in Abuja in November 1997. The leaders of this movement stressed that it was not only Muslims and other non-Christians who were participating in the injustice that is part of Nigeria's society. Many Christians are practising such things also. Therefore it became necessary for Christian leaders to study this problem and make some practical suggestions about how to deal with it. This Congress produced the Nigeria Covenant which is a ten-paragraph statement about the ethical beliefs and practices of Nigerian Christians. The sixth paragraph in the covenant says,

We believe that without justice, there can be no peace in any human society. Therefore, we pledge to be just in all our dealings with others and to resist all forms of injustice and corruption in society including giving or receiving bribes of money, positions, material possessions, sexual favours or intangible assets. We will also resist any form of injustice or unfairness in the law enforcement or judicial systems. We further pledge to discourage others we see practising such things.²⁵

It is unfortunate that in some instances the churches and denominations of Nigeria are a reflection of the Nigerian society as a whole. Bribery, extortion, nepotism, tribalism and even outright stealing have characterised many Christian groups. Some of this injustice arises from rank hypocrisy. The leaders know what they

²⁵ *Nigeria Covenant*, published by Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria, Owerri, Nigeria, p. 5.

are doing but are so pressured by their peers to be successful, they yield to the temptation. On the other hand, there are many people who do not fully understand the ethical teachings of Christianity. They practice injustice out of ignorance. Therefore, they must be taught.

The African church in the twenty-first century must build upon the foundation which has been laid in the last decade of the twentieth century to promote the ethics of Christianity. Serious attention must be given to the study of ethics and holiness so that Christian principles might be properly contextualized for Africa. These principles must be taught at all levels to the body of Christ. And most seriously, church leaders must insist that these principles become incorporated into the lives of the churches' leaders and laymen alike. Injustice will continue in Africa in the twenty-first century. However, injustice in the church must stop.

2. Respect for Individual Human Rights

Genesis 1:26 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'". Because man is made in the image of God, he is entitled to certain rights, often called 'human rights'. In the contemporary world, these rights have been understood as meaning that a man has the right to believe whatever he wants, to worship whatever God he accepts, to live wherever he chooses, to have equal opportunities toward education, jobs, political offices and other privileges. True Christianity supports these fundamental moral rights.

The black church in South Africa has led the way in its opposition to apartheid laws which have discriminated against people on the basis of their race. The last decade of the twentieth century saw great progress in the war against racial discrimination. However, the rest of Africa must follow the lead of their South African brothers in fighting the equally evil practice of ethnicity. Refusing to grant a person a job because he or she is from the wrong ethnic group is a violation of that person's fundamental human rights. Locking a person in prison because he has a different political ideology is a violation of man's basic human rights. Refusing to allow a person to own property or build a house in a

certain area because he or she belongs to another religion is a violation of that person's basic human rights. Refusing to appoint a qualified person to a position of responsibility because she is a woman is a violation of her basic human rights. These types of social problems should be viewed as immoral and inconsistent with a culture based upon Christian principles. They must be addressed clearly and firmly by the African church of the twenty-first century.

3. Assistance to the Needy

One of the clearest teachings and examples of Jesus was related to compassion for the poor.²⁶ It must be viewed as a fundamental responsibility of every culture to take care of its weak and needy members. This must be learned by the young people in the society just as certainly as they learn that it is wrong to steal things from others.

The application of this principle can take many different forms. Of course, the most obvious application is simply providing assistance for those who are most needy in society. However, Christians must not satisfy their consciences by giving a little money to a poor person. Christianity must be involved in identifying the causes of poverty and addressing these problems. God has not called all Christians to be rich. However, he has called us to help meet the needs of the poor. Helping the needy acquire

²⁶ The Old Testament Law states in Exodus 23:11, 'During the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it'. The Psalmist declared, 'Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in time of trouble'. The Wisdom Literature teaches the same truth. 'He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done' (Proverbs 19:17). The New Testament continues the same theme of caring for the needy within the society. Jesus said to the rich young ruler, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me' (Matthew 19:21). Paul declared that during his first visit to Jerusalem, the Christian brothers there accepted him. He then says, 'All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do' (Galatians 2:10).

adequate housing is not just a governmental responsibility but a responsibility of the church. Providing good water for a community is another important application of taking care of the poor and needy. Providing job training and encouraging Christian businessmen so that they can provide honourable jobs for people is a part of our Christian responsibility. The African church in the twenty-first century must understand that the church has to do far more than just sponsoring worship services and conducting funerals and weddings. It must be very much involved in identifying and meeting the needs of the society.

4. Preservation of the Environment

The very first instruction man ever received from God was 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Genesis 1:28). The implication of this passage is that man was made the custodian of God's creation. As such God expected man to preserve the world in the same pristine condition in which he received it.²⁷

Unfortunately, due to the sin of mankind, our earth has been abused and has gradually become old and worn. And nowhere has the earth received more abuse than in Africa. Farming has depleted the soil. Hunters have annihilated many species of animals. Loggers have destroyed many of the beautiful forests. Miners have left the earth scarred and ugly. Waste from cities has polluted the rivers and oceans. Plastic bags which are carelessly thrown away have made the streets and public places of Africa ugly and defiled.

The African church in the twentieth century has almost totally ignored its responsibility of being the caretaker of the world.

²⁷ As an illustration of the way that man should care for the world, God built into the agricultural practices of the Old Testament opportunities for the land to lie idle one year in every seven so that the soil could be replenished (Exodus 23:11, Leviticus 25:1-7, Nehemiah 10:30). When Jesus performed the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew particularly points out that Jesus required the disciples to pick up the left-overs (Matthew 14:20).

Christians are as guilty of abusing the environment as non-Christians. The Nigeria Covenant makes this observation in its commentary of Paragraph Seven 'Public and Church Property',

The whole earth is jointly owned by all the peoples of the earth. Therefore, resources which are jointly shared by others must be carefully preserved and protected so as to maximize their usefulness and to insure their distribution as equally as possible. For example, all people must breathe the same air. Therefore, it is wrong for one person to pollute the air that thousands of others must breathe. . . . To protect the purity and safety of water for the whole community, rivers and other water sources must not be contaminated. The unnecessary destruction of tropical rain forests, the wanton killing of endangered wildlife, and are further examples of poor stewardship.²⁸

The church in the twenty-first century must raise its voice to its members and the rest of the society that we have only one world and that God expects us to take care of it. Christian leaders must teach that the world and everything in it belongs to God and that man is merely the caretaker. The church of the next century will have to encourage its government to institute laws that will prohibit further destruction of our environment. The church must teach its children the sacred God-given responsibility they have to preserve the world God has given to us. The proper care of our environment must be viewed as a fundamental moral responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The twenty-first century will be a time of excitement for the African church as it continues to grow and begins to assume a major role of leadership for Christianity as a whole. The twenty-first century will be a time of testing for the African church. Will it measure up to the expectations and responsibilities given to it? The twenty-first century will be a time of work for the African church. To accomplish all that needs to be done will require tireless and sacrificial effort. The twenty-first century will be a time of joy and

²⁸ *Nigeria Covenant, Commentary* on Paragraph 7; p. 15.

celebration for the African church because the African church of the twenty-first century will have the opportunity of demonstrating to the world that Jesus' promise to build his Church has been "fulfilled" in one part of the world.