Prayer, Power and Empowerment: Migration and Diaspora Mission

Lecture in Honor of Hendrik Kraemer

By

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Preamble: Hendrik Kraemer, Diaspora and Mission

This lecture, delivered in memory of Hendrik Kraemer, is aimed at celebrating a new era in the history of world Christian mission from the perspectives of African diaspora Christianity. African immigrant Christianity, as it may also be called, is a microcosm of wider developments in which as David Barrett, Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako will have it, the demographic center of gravity of the faith has shifted massively from the Northern to the Southern continents. “The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of the Southern churches is dawning,” is how Philip Jenkins casts the development.1 African immigrant Christianity in global North settings, although looked upon as “religious others,” are illustrative of this transformation of Christianity into a non-Western religion.

In that respect, Hendrik Kraemer is deserving of our celebration of his work for provoking the theology and mission academies and the ecumenical movement to engage with the realities of the “religious other.” The title of his most well-known work, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World, sufficiently indicated the focus of his exclusivist concerns and thoughts in which Jesus Christ remains the only arbiter of salvation in God’s economy. In a subsequent publication, Religion and the Christian Faith, Kraemer sought to clarify some of the issues that had generated heat in the earlier one. However, his basic understanding of mission maintained a “radical discontinuity” between the Christian faith and the beliefs of all other religions. In other words he does not allow for the possibility of revelation outside the proclamation of the Christian Gospel.2

Discussions on the relationship between Christianity and other faiths have continued down the years with publications from ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches responding to the matter. What I seek to do in this lecture is not necessarily to engage with the ideas of Hendrik Kraemer but to draw attention to other significant


developments that have further altered the demographic face of world Christianity. In the new African immigrant Christian communities, we find attempts not just to affirm the supremacy of Christ but also their own mission agenda within secularizing Western societies as far as Christian presence is concerned. Much of the Christianity of the global South has been influenced by the religio-cultural contexts in which it has been formed. Ultimately, however, the significance of the new type of Christianity lies in the perception of its bearers that the North needs Jesus Christ, who appears in the testimony of John as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). Thus unlike Israel that refused to do so within their depressing exilic conditions, African diaspora Christians driven by feelings of the workability of the Gospel through prayer under difficult circumstances and empowered by the Holy Spirit, seek to sing the songs of the Lord in foreign lands.

**Christ, Other Faiths and African Religions**

The debate on the significance of Jesus Christ in the contexts of other faiths has not gone away, especially so when much of African initiated Christianity seems to function within indigenous worldviews and religio-cultural presuppositions. The astute African theologian, late Kwame Bediako of Ghana who himself came to faith from an atheistic background, weighed in to the debate on Christianity and non-Christian faiths as recently as the late 1990s. This was in relation to the primal religions of Africa and their influence on Christian expression. According to Bediako, it was difficult to conceive of the formation of the Christian Scriptures without theological engagement with the religious contexts in which the material was put together. This meant engaging with primal cultures and ideas, an area that also seemed to be of much interest to Kraemer, although ultimately Jesus Christ remains the only way to salvation. Abraham, for example, was called out of a polytheistic context into a monotheistic one as the ancestral Patriarch of the New Covenant in which Jesus Christ, his “seed” emerges as Lord, offering “better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

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Kwame Bediako points out that the intense struggle against “Baalism” in the Old Testament also occurred within the context of the reality of “other faiths.” The prophets of Yahweh thus felt called to do battle with those of the baals. Indeed, it is within a context of competing religious ideas and philosophies that Paul attempts to press home his arguments on the supremacy of Christ in his epistle to the Colossians. He told them:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossian 2:8).

Similarly, as an African evangelical Christian, Bediako posited that “a creative African evangelical theological tradition can only emerge from a serious engagement with the religious world of African traditional religions.”

Prior to these observations, John Mbiti had already noted that there were elements in the primal religions of Africa through which God prepared its people for the reception of the Gospel. The pre-Christian heritage in Africa for Mbiti was truly a preparatio evangelica, that is, preparation for the Gospel.

Arguing along similar lines, Bediako averred that we cannot avoid a serious engagement with the religious and spiritual issues that African Traditional Religions raise for us since they form the cultural background of the Christian faith of most African Christians. The necessities of theological apologetics, he noted, required that we make sense of our Christian affirmations only in relation to whatever alternatives are found in the contexts in which we make those affirmations. In other words:

[Our] Christian affirmations about the uniqueness of Christ achieve their real impact when they are subjected to the test to establish their credentials and validity not only in terms of the religious and spiritual universe in which Christians habitually operate, but also and indeed especially, in terms of the religious and habitual worlds which persons of other faiths inhabit.

Although not necessarily an examination of his works, Kraemer is significant for us in drawing attention to the importance of reflecting on the Christian faith in relation to the

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4 Bediako, “How is Jesus Lord?” 34.


6 Bediako, “How is Jesus Lord?” 37.
existence of religious others. Hendrik Kraemer resisted the fulfillment motif that Bediako and others argued for later because he reasserted a rigid and uncompromising stance toward other religions and to that end, he may not have been the most popular churchman in the world of Christian mission. Nevertheless, he at least forced the debate between Christianity and other faiths on to the agenda of mission in a new way from the late 1930s.

The fact that late 20th century African theologians are still dealing with theology against the backdrop of the primal religious imagination is an indication of the relevance of his ideas for our times. An important indication of Kraemer’s monumental contributions to mission studies and to some extent even ecclesiology within contexts of religious pluralism, may be found on the blurb of his reprinted volume Religion and the Christian Faith first published in 1965. What the publishers write is placed within the overall context of Kraemer’s work and I find it appropriate to quote it here in full:

A rich and profound contribution to the debate on the position of the Christian faith in the modern world opened up Kraemer’s The Christian Message in a Non-Western World. In Religion and the Christian Faith he deals with many of the criticisms of his position, and offers an apologia, at once luminous and massive, of the Christian religion as the revelation of God to Man and the faith of all mankind. …Its significance for the Christian Church throughout the world is obvious, but it is also a monumental witness to the Christian religion for all those who ask not only for a faith ‘once delivered’ but a faith to believe in their own day and generation.⁷

In what follows, I return to the principles laid down in the arguments of Mbiti and Bediako in terms of the ways in which Africa’s religious past influences the present Christian enterprise. African diaspora Christianity is a new religious other because it is culturally different, theologically fundamental and even aggressive, and it seeks to reverse the old paradigms of mission in which Christianity was above all else, a white man’s religion. We will look at the interface between African diaspora Christianity and the changing face of mission and the attempts to affirm the supremacy of Jesus Christ making him relevant among diaspora peoples in the midst of competing religious ideas and processes of secularization.

Christianity of the Southern Continents

The premise on which we proceed is then that the new demographic strengths of Christianity are in the global South (and East): Asia, Latin America and Africa. The churches of the South are different from those of the North. African churches, precisely because they received Christianity within entirely different contexts from which the early missionaries came to the continent, offer types of Christianity in which certain religio-cultural values remain palpable. Thus as Philip Jenkins argues, it is easy to find religious behaviors and rituals in African church practices that Westerners often interpret as going beyond the bounds of theologically orthodox Christianity. In that sense, African immigrant churches have often been looked upon in the West as “religious others” and placed on the same pedestal as non-Christian religious traditions. This is because a number of radical writers, Jenkins notes, still link Christianity with Western imperialism and do not recognize the ways in which Christianity has been transformed through African hands. So as he explains below, many still stereotype the faith as the religion of the West:

All too often, statements about what “modern Christians accept” or what “Catholics today believe,” refer only to what that ever-shrinking remnant of Western Christians and Catholics believe. Such assertions are outrageous today, and as time goes by they will become ever further removed from reality. Europe is demonstrably not the Faith. The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of the Southern churches is dawning.

The otherness of these African Christians in the eyes of their hosts stems from the stubborn resistance to the collapse of European missionary hegemony in the Western imagination. There is in the modern West a certain inability to come to terms with the fact that Korean missionaries for example now dominate Christian activity across the world. One study concludes that the massive presence of Korean missionaries in world Christianity “highlights the unique set of gifts which immigrant Christian communities can exercise not only in their ‘home’…churches and missionary initiatives, but more

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8 Jenkins, Next Christendom, see chapter 6.

9 Jenkins, Next Christendom, 163.
importantly in global mission leadership.”\textsuperscript{10} The missionary Christianity of pre-independent Africa ceased to be paradigmatic of world Christianity since the emergence of African initiated churches at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It is revealing that seeing the potential of African initiated Christianity Kraemer encouraged his student, Inus Daneel of Zimbabwe, to pursue an academic study of the phenomenon at a time when many considered them an aberration to true Christian faith.

Kwame Bediako was deliberately cited at some length above to indicate the importance of engaging with the “religious other” in order to be able to properly validate our own belief systems. The primary question motivating this work relates to exactly what African Christians in the diaspora may be saying about Christianity generally and to their Western compatriots in particular in the midst of the changes that we see in Christian mission today. For many of these immigrants, Christianity has been very empowering and affirmative. Thus Wonsuk Ma who is himself a Pentecostal missionary from the Philippines serving in the UK has noted that it is the turn of the churches in the Global South to revive the Western church. The role of the diaspora in the midst of the secular West is therefore critically important.\textsuperscript{11}

The type of Christianity we describe below looks different from their “missionary originals” because Africans, against the backdrops of indigenous interpretations of Scripture and religio-cultural experiences privilege the pneumatic over the cerebral aspects of the faith. Here again I am inclined to let a more discerning Western voice speak to the issue:

\begin{quote}
The types of Christianity that have thrived most successfully in the global south have been very different from what many Europeans and North Americans consider mainstream. These models have been far more enthusiastic, much more centrally concerned with the immediate workings of the supernatural, through prophecy, visions, ecstatic utterances, and healing. In fact, they have differed so widely from the cooler Northern norms as to arouse suspicion that these enthusiastic Africans...are essentially reviving the pagan practices of traditional society.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{11} Ma, \textit{Korean Diaspora}, 23.

\textsuperscript{12} Jenkins, \textit{Next Christendom}, 134.
For the purposes of our discussion therefore, we note that as Christianity becomes more and more non-Western, it is likely to be transformed through its immersion into the prevailing cultures of African societies. In African religious traditions, what is ultimately real is the spiritual. Thus through the pneumatic forms of Christianity lived and expressed by African diaspora Christians, we can discern what the ordinary African considers critical to the faith. These would include not simply the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord but that he also, by the power of the Spirit, intervenes in real life situations decimating the power of witches and demons and restoring people to hope and fulfillment within a physically and spiritually precarious diaspora in which faith has to be lived. A colleague living in the UK once asked me at a conference: “why do African Christians living in our country spend so much time praying?” My answer was simple: “when they ask God for their daily bread, they really mean it!” The immigration systems could be so tough that resort to prayer for strength, grace and protection from being found out as an “illegal alien” becomes the only option for many of them.

**Migrant Christianity as the New Religious “Other”**

Our particular focus here is the examination of the important development of migration and mission in world Christianity. Our emphasis is on the nature of African Christianity in the diaspora. African diaspora Christian congregations have been described optimistically as perhaps representing the future face of Christianity in Western Europe. In most parts of Europe, the typical African immigrant church is a “religious other” professing an adulterated variant of Christianity that is considered biblically suspicious and theologically deficient by their hosts. In line with this suspicious and cautious attitude towards African forms of Christian expression, German theologian Claudia Währisch-Oblau also notes how the United Evangelical Mission of Germany, for example, had operated under the assumption that migrant churches were formed in search of religious identity suited to the original religiocultural backgrounds of members and therefore virtually placing a question mark on the type of Christianity being expressed and therefore sought to provide them “better” direction.

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In many cases immigrant congregations with historic links to German missions example, were expected to function under German church leadership and work within their ecclesial structures. She places the process of secularization of the responses of the new immigrant Christian communities in their rightful contexts in the following words:

[While] in London and Amsterdam, Cologne and Prague church buildings are being turned into shops, housing space or even pubs, new congregations started by migrant Christians have been setting up worship spaces in disused factory halls, car parks, or even converted cinemas. These Christians and congregations represent a Christianity that, if noticed at all, is mostly perceived to be foreign, transient, and diasporal, in short: a minority phenomenon which might need some protection and support, but nothing that would have an impact on majority Christianity.

Contrary to these assumptions many immigrant churches and their leaders have come to define themselves as “missionaries” who are “planning to reach out not only to their own nationals, but to German society as a whole” in the bid to bring revival to “dead” German churches.14


Among Ghanaian Immigrants in New York. The following bird’s eye view of what distinguishes them from their Northern counterparts also comes from Jenkins:

These seemingly diverse Southern churches have in common many aspects of belief and practice, and these characteristics differentiate them from older Northern Christianity. …the sources of evil are located not in social structures but in types of spiritual evil, which can be effectively combated by believers. Southern religion is not otherworldly in the sense of escapist, since faith is expected to lead to real and observable results in this world.

African immigrant Christianity is a new goldmine in the world of religious studies and non-Western theology. It is revealing new paradigms in Christian mission unthinkable only two decades ago. What this tells us is that an important variable now defining the nature and focus of Christian mission is the interface between human migration and the new religious communities emerging with it. Demographic changes, Jenkins notes elsewhere in his book, naturally comes with consequences for religion and for the purposes of this essay, the new immigrant groups under study here “follow cultural patterns more akin to their home societies than to the host nations.” That is what makes them different. In spite of the globalization of Islam, many of today’s European immigrants are African Christians and in concurrence with Jenkins, I believe that “they raise the prospect of a revitalized Christian presence on European soil.” They may not be attractive to secular-minded Westerners but the witness of presence is also important.

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16 Jenkins, Next Christendom, 98.

17 Jenkins, Next Christendom, 121.

18 Jenkins, Next Christendom, 122.
if it turns out to be the only contribution that these diaspora communities make to Western society.

**Christianity in Africa and African Christianity**

Immigrant Christianity in the Diasporas in which strangers have established new churches in the former heartlands of the faith must be considered a major new fact of mission for our time. African Christianity and Christianity in Africa may not necessarily mean the same thing. Christianity in Africa in its real sense would refer to communities defined by their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and the way these beliefs are expressed as part of the common witness of world Christianity on the continent. African Christianity, on the other hand, refers to expressions of Christianity informed by the primal worldviews embedded in African cultures and available also on the global stage. This would make it seem as if the Christianity of the South has strayed from older orthodoxies but as Jenkins further notes, they have in almost all cases remained firmly within the limits of what may be considered authentic Christian traditions.¹⁹ “Far from inventing some new African or Korean religions that derive from local cultures,” he writes, “the rising churches usually preach a strong and even pristine Christian message.”²⁰ In that respect, the lordship of Jesus Christ could be said to constitute the basis of all Christianity but the faith is not expressed the same way across cultures precisely because cultures and peoples differ.

Many African Christians who migrate keep their faith alive in the new places of abode. Speaking from the perspective of African Diaspora Christianity and its encounter with secularizing Western countries, I use the expression “secularizing” advisedly knowing that in many such places Christian recession has not necessarily excluded spirituality from private spheres. Not only are there many non-Christian new religious movements emerging within Western communities but there is also the practice of new forms of spirituality facilitated by the media, especially the internet and other social media. It is in the midst of these developments that non-Western forms of Christianity have gained prominence. The development teaches us that God is still active in history working his

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¹⁹ Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 135.

²⁰ Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 135.
purposes out in Jesus Christ as Lord. God may perhaps be doing this by using the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; the weak things to shame the strong; and the lowly things of this world; and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him (I Corinthians 1:27-29).

The Church as an Apostolic Body

The presence of African Christians in the diaspora drives home the point that even Christianity, in spite of whatever shared core beliefs it may have, is not a monolithic faith. In terms of their sense of mission, the self-definition of African immigrant Christian communities is very apostolic. African church leaders in Europe today, whatever their Christian persuasion, are driven in part by the fact that of a divine mandate to bring the gospel back to those who originally provided it.\(^\text{21}\) The mindset is that by prayer, the manifestations of power and the empowerment of the Spirit lost ground could be reclaimed for Christ.

Hendrik Kraemer argued that the Church is by its nature and calling an “apostolic body” which means, the Church is sent into the world with a specific mission for the whole world.\(^\text{22}\) In his words:

\begin{quote}
As an apostolic body the Church is commissioned to proclaim—by its *kerygma* of God’s acts of salvation in Christ, by its *koinonia* as a new community living in bonds of peace and charity—the message of God’s dealings with, and purpose for, the world and mankind. This message has to go out to all men, in all lands, in all situations and civilizations, in all conditions and spheres and circumstances of life, so witnessing to God’s redemptive order in Jesus Christ, by word and deed.\(^\text{23}\)
\end{quote}

The critical expressions in Kraemer’s submission above include his reference to the Christian community as an “apostolic body.” This is a function of the church also articulated in the historic creeds. The others include the fact that the message of the redemptive purposes of God in Christ is meant for all humankind, in all lands, in all

\(^{21}\) Ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise*, 1.


\(^{23}\) Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 18
situations and civilizations and in all conditions, spheres and circumstances of life. Kraemer further makes the point that the “apostolic outreach” of the church implies embracing the “certainty of a given and knowable truth.” This truth is believed to possess preeminence over all others including human philosophies no matter how sublime these may sound. In line with this thinking, African Christians although migrated to find economic opportunities, “consider that God has given them a unique opportunity to spread the good news among those who have gone astray.”

In the pursuit of this apologetic agenda against other faiths and human philosophies, Kraemer suggests that the Church “has to define also its relation to the various aspects of culture as a whole, and has to indicate the motives and roots of its missionary character.” These issues were raised within the context of how Christianity through the life and theology of the church engages with non-Christian religious peoples and traditions. In our context however, we seek to apply this understanding of the mission of the Church of the Lord Jesus in diaspora situations of secularism, alienation, rejection of the idea of the Holy and the inability to fit into European Christian communities as a result of the cultural gaps and not in a few cases racist attitudes towards minority Christian enclaves.

Retrieving the Stolen: Apostolic Body in Diaspora

There are different reasons for the movement of people. They move in tandem with the movement of capital and resources or as their perceptions of and opportunities for better living conditions become available elsewhere. Migration takes place as transnational economic corporations and organizations of intellectual, social and political life grow in number and require more transnational personnel to operate and serve. There are many others who move because their very survival depends on such movement. For many Africans, migration occurs because their fields are dry, crops have failed or simply because of one form of persecution or another. Whatever the reason for migration, for many Africans, the process of moving from beginning to end involves important religious dimensions including rituals of facilitation, breakthroughs and

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24 Ter Haar, Halfway to Paradise, 1-2.

25 Kraemer, Religion and the Christian Faith, 18.
survival. It is thus not uncommon for prayer centers in Ghana and Nigeria for example to receive potential migrants who come with their passports for prayer and anointing as they apply for visas or if already secured, for protection and success on the journey.

These are the people who constitute the religious communities that we are calling Christian churches in the diaspora. Migration has offered them opportunities to see at firsthand what has happened to Christianity in the land of the missionaries and they feel empowered to do something about the situation. Many may even be undocumented but the dynamism of their faith belies the troubles that they often go through as illegal aliens. Their circumstances are such that some amount of ethnic bonding and boundary creation may be inevitable. They have therefore often been seen as practicing the “ghettoization” of religion. Nevertheless it will be a misplaced argument to suggest that mission and witness are peripheral to the lives of African diaspora Christian communities. One day as we waited for a German Methodist service to close to enable Ghanaian Methodists in Hamburg who rent the building to begin the service, one Ghanaian remarked to me that “the hearts of these Germans has been stolen by the devil.” It was for him the only explanation for a nation so blessed by God to turn its back on him and question his existence. It is only those whose hearts have been stolen by the devil who turn their backs on the God who is the source of wealth.

Thus there is much prayer in these diaspora churches for personal concerns—particularly proper documentation, employment, health, family and deliverance from witches seeking to thwart endeavors away from home. However, there is also prayer that God will deliver Europe from the claws of the devil who according to Peter, prowls around like a lion looking for someone to devour (I Peter 5:8). In John 10:10, Jesus described the devil as one who comes but to “steal, kill and destroy” activities which in contemporary immigrant religious thought are actualizing through secularization, gay/lesbian ordinations, and the public promotion of what may be considered morally wrong and detestable in the eyes of African Christian communities. The activities through which the devil has stolen the hearts and minds of Western Europeans are also supposed to include the invocation of evolutionist theories as explanations for the existence of the universe, the barring of prayer in public places, and the treatment of homosexuality as a human rights rather than a moral issue condemned by the Christian Scriptures.
Migration, Mission and Diaspora in Biblical Contexts

There may be other reasons for the establishment of immigrant churches by non-Westerners living in the developed West, but the thought that secularization is the devil’s way of stealing, killing and destroying Christianity in Germany is a strong motivation for the evangelistic activities of diaspora churches. In a sense Christian mission is now being interpreted with African biblical lenses. Thus as scholars such as Währisch-Oblau has pointed out, in the minds of many members of immigrant Christian communities, they are working with God on a rescue mission to return Europe to the God in whom all people are supposed to “live and move and have their being” (Acts 17:28).

Migration and Christian mission have been interwoven with each other since God the Creator first revealed himself to humanity in the First Adam. The mandate of the God of mission to Adam then was clear and empowering:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish and the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1:28).

The loss of God’s image meant a renewal of the mandate which occurred through different covenants from Noah and Moses to Abraham culminating in the Word, God himself becoming flesh and dwelling with humanity. In the words of the Gospel according to St. John: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The truth is the fact that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ as a mission strategy.

Andrew F. Walls serves us well in an article on the “Diaspora Factor in Christian History” in which he draws attention to the biblical precedents of migration history.26 It was the experience of exile and wandering in the desert in search of a homeland that proved to be the vehicle for the people of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition to receive the promise and fulfillment of God’s care and protection and his love and grace for all peoples. Christ was an outcast in his own country, yet in him as Paul would have it,  

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“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” Exile and wandering in the desert became paradigmatic experiences out of which the religious fellowship of Christ understands itself as transcending political and other borders. “Embedded in such religious traditions are the values of love, compassion and hospitality, and care for orphans and widows, strangers and exiles.”

The article by Walls begins with reference to the fact that migration is basic to the human condition. Migration, he notes arguing from the experiences of the Bible, has been repeated endlessly in human history often having determinative effects on the life of peoples. Of the lot, the migrations of Abraham from Mesopotamia, the Israelites out of Egypt, and the scattering of Christians as a result of persecution and martyrdom of Stephen seem to be the most popular ones. If we take all the stories together, Walls points out, we have examples of almost every known form of migration both voluntary and involuntary. They include: fugitive migration (Jacob); transported slaves (Joseph); victims of famine (Joseph’s brothers); migrant workers, even one with an unresolved claim for residence (Ruth); refugees; traders, invaders, prisoners of war; deportees and returnees. It is his summary that migration could be both punitive and redemptive that I am attracted to:

Migration often stands for dispossession, loss of patrimony or habitat. Adam loses Eden, Cain loses the security of the group, Israel loses land, kingdom and temple. In all these cases, migration is punitive, the result of wrongdoing, leading to dislocation and deprivation. But there is another style of migration that is redemptive rather than punitive, Abraham is not expelled from his Mesopotamia city; he is divinely called out of it, with the promise of another land for his descendants.

When we come to the New Testament, he points out, it is still Abraham, the perennial migrant, who becomes the exemplar of Christian faith and the point to Christian identity (Romans 4):

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Abraham heads the list of those who died in faith without attaining the well-founded city prepared for the (Hebrews 11:8-10). Christians in that letter are described

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in terms applicable to migrant workers, seeking that better future that migrants typically desire for their children. Other New Testament writers use the figure of the diaspora, that institutionalized migration whereby so many Jews lived outside the promised land, to portray normal Christian experience to the world (Philippians 3:20). One even describes Christians as refugees (I Peter 1:1; 2:11 GNB).²⁹

In the same article, Walls argues that in many places migration forwarded the spread of Christianity. To that end, the Acts of the Apostles shows how Barnabas and Paul ministered in Jewish communities with “a fringe of interested Gentiles” (Acts 13:14f.; 14:1f.).³⁰

All the forms of migration described by Walls are present in the African migration and diaspora experiences. There are African immigrants who in the midst of extreme economic and social conditions of deprivation still interpret living in the diaspora in terms of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for mission. Such mission is said to include breaking the secularizing barriers of the modern West in order to release people from the bondage of Satan.

Mission according to Kraemer means the announcement or transmission and confession of faith and to that end, the Church is supposed to “continue the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world.”³¹ He cites the incarnation as the epitome of Christian mission referring to the fact that that mission of the Church is the reflection of “divine extravertness.” Thus in its missionary work, Kraemer explains, the Church expresses its constant looking towards “the ends of the earth” and “the end of time.”³² Mission, interpreted through the Incarnation model is retained in the work of Jehu H. Hanciles. In a poignant argument Hanciles has noted that the version of the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 is unlikely to retain its primacy in the growing non-

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³¹ Kraemer, Religion and the Christian Faith, 29.
³² Kraemer, Religion and the Christian Faith, 29.
Western missionary movement.\textsuperscript{33} The fact is that those involved in diaspora mission as immigrants do not possess the same economic and technological privileges that the Western missionary did when they worked in Africa.

Non-Western diaspora missionaries are working from the periphery. This mission in contrast to their Western forbears, Hanciles notes, “comes not from the centers of political power and economic wealth but from the periphery.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus the model of mission that fits the diaspora initiatives is the Johannine version with its implications of humble service and vulnerability on account of the fact that it follows the Incarnation principle. Hanciles draws out the implications of the incarnational model of mission in relation to the vulnerabilities associated with diaspora life in the following words:

…Christ’s life and ministry included the travail of a refugee, the pain of uprootedness, and the alienation that comes with being a stranger. Even the emptying of status to taken on the form of a servant has its parallels in the migrant experience. …Non-Western Christian migrants live among new peoples, dwell in the neighborhood, and are pressed into varying degrees of adaptation and assimilation, though often without entirely losing cultural traits. Much about their experience also evokes sharp images of the biblical paradigm of God’s people as pilgrims, migrants, and refugees. …God’s revelation to humanity does not occur from the centers of world power but in the margins of society.\textsuperscript{35}

The aggregate meaning of all this is that it may take “Wise men” following a divine star to discern that the little vulnerable baby in the manger is actually the incarnate God in the midst of his own creation. In relation to diaspora Christianity, the great new fact of our time which has momentous consequences for mission is that the great migration that took colonialism and Christianity to the non-Western world has now gone into reverse. Immigrants are now beginning to have a significant place in Western Christian history, for it may be that in some areas of the West at least, “Christianity will be associated increasingly with immigrants.”\textsuperscript{36} It must not surprise us, talking about


\textsuperscript{34} Hanciles, “Migration and Mission,” 149.

\textsuperscript{35} Hanciles, “Migration and Mission,” 150.

\textsuperscript{36} Walls, “Mission and Migration,” 10.
mission to the ends of the earth therefore, that a high level of internationalism has crept into the missionary agenda of the contemporary African Pentecostal/charismatic movement.

**Embassy of God**

To illustrate the ways in which immigrant Christianity is engaging with secular Europe, consider the life and work of Sunday Adelaja, a Nigerian charismatic pastor who has been working in Europe for twenty years. His story has been of particular interest to me in the last decade because the difference that a single immigrant Christian has made in Eastern Europe generally and the Ukraine in particular is phenomenal. He has been under the judicial spotlight lately for some pyramid schemes involving close associates that went bad. That notwithstanding, it is a well-known fact that his problems began with subtle opposition to his ministry that started drawing crowds away from the state-related Eastern Orthodox Churches. His church has attracted large numbers of former alcoholics, drug addicts and prostitutes who now openly testify about their salvation and transformation in Christ.

Apart from the African origins of its founder there is little that is specifically African or Nigerian about Embassy of God. I concede that the African identity of the founder is very significant but this must be placed within its proper context. With its 25,000 strong membership being almost entirely white Eastern European, Embassy of God does not belong to the same category as the many African immigrant churches that have burgeoned within the African Diaspora in Western Europe and North America since the 1990s. Indeed from its logo to the use and display of banners in worship and the international agenda of its founder, there are three main identities that seem critical to the self-understanding of Embassy of God. The first is the immigrant status of its founder; the second is the church’s Pentecostal/charismatic status characterized by a strong theology of power and spiritual warfare; and third, the deliberate pursuit of a transnational agenda in mission.

Catherine Wanner who has also studied Embassy of God speaks to its transnational focus when she notes that unlike early evangelical communities that either sought to retreat from the world because of its corrupting elements or strive to prove that they are in the world but not of it, the Embassy of God “aims to remake the world in its own image, radically altering, once again, evangelical sensibilities and responses to worldly,
profane matters.”

This transnational agenda is evident in both the name of the church and its logo. She captures succinctly the meaning of the logo as follows:

The symbol of the Embassy of God is a globe with Africa forthrightly positioned in the center. The globe is capped by a golden crown with a cross. Just below the crown is a light emanating from Ukraine, which remains otherwise unmarked. The light from Ukraine shines throughout Europe and the Middle East. Africa figures prominently, but the light and energy of the church emanate from Ukraine around the world.

The name of the church was also chosen to reflect the transnational understanding of Christian mission: The Church is the representative of God on the earth, His “Embassy.” Therefore we, children of God, are the citizens of His Divine Kingdom and not citizens of this world! The Blessed Kingdom of God [is] a place of destruction of curses. At the head of every kingdom is a king. Our King is Jesus Christ! He is the Lord of all nations; Jesus Christ is the Savior for everyone, irrespective of his age, color or skin, nationality and social status.

The witness of Adelaja in Eastern Europe has been strong and his influence stems in part from the part that he comes from the underside of history.

Prayer, Power and Empowerment: Holy Spirit and Diaspora Mission

An important metaphor used by the Apostle Peter in describing the Church is to refer to the members as “living stones.” They are living stones by virtue of their relation to the one Living Stone, Jesus Christ. There are three important aspects of this metaphor that I consider relevant for our purposes. First is the fact that for a stone to make the transition from an ordinary or inanimate object to an extraordinary or living one, it needs to be infused with something that gives it life. In God’s economy, that life comes from the breath or wind of God, the Holy Spirit. Second, once the stones are brought to life by the Spirit of God working through Jesus Christ, they can be used to build a “spiritual house” that is, a Christian community that is alive and manifesting the

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38 Wanner, Communities of the Converted, 214.

39 Stated in Church of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations: 8th Anniversary Brochure (Kyiv, 2002), 5.
presence of God. Third, the metaphor of living stones take on added poignancy in alien contexts, similar to functioning within non-Christian religions, which Kraemer talks about. In other words, the calling of God upon the life of the church is to live out his presence in an alien world as Peter admonishes:

Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (I Peter 2:11-12).

Thus the desire to bring Europe to Christ may not be immediately visible but the presence of immigrant churches within secularizing contexts such as what we have in Europe bears testimony to the fact that the Gospel is well and truly alive even if now propagated by vulnerable people feeling disempowered by immigration laws. God is preserving the integrity of the Gospel in the lives of aliens in foreign lands—immigrant Christian communities—in order to keep Christian witness alive in the world.

According to one qualitative study, African immigrants in the USA are making a significant social and cultural impact especially, through the proliferation of religious communities, and this in spite of their modest numbers. An important conclusion of the study in question is the way in which religion in the diaspora has become a means for the establishment of identity. Nevertheless, the primary motivation for the establishment of religious communities goes beyond the socio-cultural function of the reproduction of ethnic enclaves in foreign lands. Thus the question of diaspora Israel, “how shall we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land” has been reinvented in the lives of contemporary African immigrant Christians who are seeing possibilities rather than impossibilities. A study of the Nigerian Christian community the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star revealed that in order to champion the cause of a global mission and to challenge popular beliefs that “African churches are local, specialized, and thereby

historically inconsequential in the West, members of this group tend to eschew ethnic identification and promote instead a universal Christian identity.\textsuperscript{41}

The words from the cry of Israel in Babylon have become the most important running theme in the discourse on immigrant Christianity. In the original story as captured in Psalm 137 the depression of exilic life led to God’s people literally abandon worship because they felt forsaken by the God of promise. When their captors requested to hear them sing some of the worship songs of Zion for them, the Israelites refused asking: “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4). African immigrant Christians have chosen a different path from their historical forbears and by their very presence in the diaspora expressing their faith in ways intended to reverse both the traditional notions of mission as going from North to South and also the secularization processes underway in the North. African immigrant Christianity makes a forceful statement about Christianity as something that is alive and well and that makes an important contribution to world Christianity.

**Challenge to Rethink Mission**

Jesus did not deal directly with issues of immigration but obviously the New Testament has a lot to say about dealing with the other, especially the marginalized, stranger and vulnerable. The point of Peter’s vision (Acts 10) was so that he could be prepared to embrace Gentile converts among whom the Holy Spirit was also active. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of inclusion so it is by the experience of the Spirit that Gentiles come to inherit the blessing of Abraham (Galatians 3:14-15). The Incarnation was about redemption through identification. When through the Incarnation, divinity was translated into humanity, God in Christ as the Second Adam fully and completely identified with fallen human nature in order to redeem it. God disempowered himself that he might empower his people in the course of mission.

Further, the bearer of redemption not only started life in a context of deprivation because “there was no room for them in the inn” but also became a refugee shortly thereafter. According to M. Daniel Carroll, the joy of the nativity scene and the wonder

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of the visit of the Magi are overshadowed by the senseless death of innocent children and the flight of refugees. The migration of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus, he notes, “locates the Jesus story within a movement that spans history, of people desiring a better life or escaping the threat of death.”

Throughout the New Testament, it is within such diaspora conditions that the Gospel takes root and the hope is that as Christianity moves from the South to the North, we shall discern in it the move of God empowering the weak to fulfill his purposes within the strong. These are truths evident in the life of the head of the church, Jesus Christ, that challenges his body in the developed West to respond positively to the Gospel being spread in the midst of alienating conditions under which many an African immigrant live their lives.

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