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## **The African Church as a Mixed Bag: Its Quantity and Quality Reduced to a Remnant Status**

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### **Abstract**

The primary focus of this article is on the remnant nature and scope of the African church. Thus, I employ the biblical concept of a "remnant" to argue that the present demographical statistic of church growth in Africa does not translate to a concrete or tangible moral and ethical impact on society. In spite of the Southward movement of the centre of gravity of Christianity, the African church remains vulnerable like a remnant. It is in short supply of strong prophetic voices against enormous socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-religious injustices or corrupt practices at all spheres, including the church itself. The concept of a "remnant" is a key concept in the Old Testament (OT). It indicates a distinction between the "true" believers and the large bulk of outwardly religious people that does not abide by the basic requirements of being the people of God. I am using it in this article to make a comparison between the statistical evidence and the real impact on the society. Therefore, in the article I seek to argue that the African church statistics should not bluff us. Of course, looking at the multidimensional social, ethical, moral, economic, political and religious matters confronting the African continent even where the church seems to be in the majority, one cannot help but conclude that the African church is a remnant church. But, how can one convince a reader that African Christianity is a remnant faith when the current statistics is showing otherwise? For example, in 2020 the Center for the Study of Global Christianity published data that claimed, "[T]here

are more than 631 million Christians that currently reside in Africa.”<sup>1</sup> This figure accounts for 45 percent of the Africa’s population. Furthermore, the Pew Research Center postulated that, “By the year 2060, six of the top ten countries with the largest Christian populations will be in Africa.”<sup>2</sup> In spite of this apparent growth of the church, this paper argues that the African church is a remnant. Taking the statistical evidence available at face value, it is ridiculous to say that the African church is a remnant. Of course, we can define a remnant as a few people who remain after a catastrophe or war has struck the larger group. In the sense that we are using this concept here, we are not only referring to numbers or quantity. Rather, we are concerned with both the quantity and quality. What are the evidences that the African church is a remnant? The paper seeks to answer this question by addressing the following issues: the African church and its remnant reality; why the African church still remains a remnant church in spite of its enormous numerical growth; and the need for a radical spirituality.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, over the years, the African church has witnessed unprecedented growth to the extent that scholars have concluded that the centre of Christian gravity has shifted to the Southern Hemisphere.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in this paper, I attempt to argue that the African church remains a remnant church in terms of its moral and ethical impact on the general society. The positive narratives that scholars like Philip Jenkins (2006) and Timothy Tennent (2007) have given about the African church have not allowed us to carefully evaluate the public impact of the church on the African society. Few scholars have drawn our attention to

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<sup>1</sup> “The Current State of Christianity in Africa, 24 June, 2019. Culled from <https://thelastwell.org/the-current-state-of-christianity-in-africa/>, on 4 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “The Current State of Christianity in Africa, 24 June, 2019. Culled from <https://thelastwell.org/the-current-state-of-christianity-in-africa/>, on 4 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Gene L. Green, “Introduction”, *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman & Gene L. Green, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012), 9.

some of the salient challenges that the African church is facing. For example, Beneet Bujo has one peculiar challenge:

There have been many obstacles to hopes that independence would create a more friendly environment for African cultural values and lead to the development of a theology freed from colonial burdens. Wars, corrupt dictators, and a continuing economic colonialism from the rich North have created an environment where Africans continue to struggle to assert their own dignity and the dignity of their cultures.<sup>4</sup>

The situation Bujo described in 1992 has not have any significant change in the 21st century. Conflict, violence and wars have continued to devastate our communities. Many countries with high Christian presence in Africa are still defined by abject poverty. Apparently, the African church has not yet connected its mission with the need of the poor in the continent. This is one of the reasons why the African church can be regarded as a remnant. For example, its theologians, unlike their Latin American counterparts, have not yet realised that the intrinsic connection between socio-economic injustices and conflict violence. That is, our history of social, cultural, economic, political, and religious injustices have created a situation whereby poverty is a man-made, destructive thing that must be fought against. Gustavo Gutierrez, for instance, realised that “Poverty is not a result of chance; it results from unjust structures.”<sup>5</sup> To encourage the Latin American church and its theologians to stand up against the oppression of the poor, he argued that poor people are a social class. He wrote, “It became crystal clear that in order to serve the poor, one had to move into political action.”<sup>6</sup> Many African theologians focus on the matters of culture and identity, while their counterparts in Latin America

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<sup>4</sup> Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context: Faith and Cultures*, (Maryknoll, New York, 1992), 5.

<sup>5</sup> This is quoted from Brown, 1978:61-62 by William Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> This is quoted from Brown, 1978:61-62 by William Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 80-81.

wrestle with social and political issues.<sup>7</sup> Another reason why the African church is showing signs of a minority status in the continent in spite of its celebrated numerical growth lies in its lack of a concrete stand or lack of having a political ideology and stance that enable it to prophetically critique and denounce the social injustices happening on the continent. Thus, this paper argues that if the church in Africa wants to have a significant positive impact across the continent it will have to give priority to the existential problems relating to justice, human rights, peace and religious freedom, which will bring hope for the future. The church and its theology have to “make the local reality in all of its dynamics the starting point of theological reflection.”<sup>8</sup> This dynamic is not limited to values and identity, but also to political power and social/economic domination. Our theological reflection has to address science, technology, trade patterns, the media, particularly from the dimension and point of view of the “victim” of those forces of modernity. Another important issue facing the African continent is neo-colonialism, which is spearheaded by China and multinational companies, railways contractors, etc, who are exploiting African workers at all levels.<sup>9</sup> The African church can be said to be a church without a political and social theology because of its longstanding divorce between evangelism and social actions-(imported from overseas) and the concentration on the separation of church and state, the sacred-secular divide, and so on, all of which are a misconception of the Christian faith and its public dimension (Matthew 28:18). The next section will address the African church and its remnant reality.

## **The African church and its remnant reality**

In Africa, evangelical Protestants need to pick up the issues that they have been known to confront and had long championed – justice, the plights of the poor, freedom and so on. The African church in some African countries’ context has allied with the wealthy and the powerful. Consequently, Kamaara notes the nature and scope of the remnant experience of the African church when she writes, “While Christian values are expected to foster national

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<sup>7</sup> Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, 73.

cohesion and identity, more often than not Christianity has provided a convenient rallying point around which ethnic conflicts are mobilised.”<sup>10</sup> African theologians and historiographers have largely focused their theological reflection on the nature of Christianity and overlooking its political function.<sup>11</sup> The church action and/or inaction is responsible for the combusting situation of evil! To a large extent, the African church needs to hear Paul’s admonishing, “Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything with love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14 – NLT)

In the 1980s African theologians, alongside their counterparts in the Majority World, were very optimistic about the impact Christianity would have on the African continent. The African theological enterprise raises many questions.” One of such questions was:

Regarding the churches, is that movement marginalised, or is it part of the African churches’ dynamism? The answer to that question, in Africa itself, is not so simple. And it seems that the same question is not simple anywhere in the Third World. In reality, the concrete experience of the African churches shows scepticism, sometimes full commitment, and even enthusiasm. The attitude of the churches is therefore very diversified. However, we must recognise scepticism as being the attitude of some individuals. The general tendency is toward a global conscientisation of the people in favour of human liberation and promotion in Africa. The solidarity to the churches with people who suffer, who are dominated and oppressed, is proclaimed all over Africa in such a way that it can serve as a model.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eunice Kamaara, “Towards Christian National Identity in Africa: A Historical Perspective to the Challenge of Identity to the Church in Kenya” in *Studies in World Christianity*, 16, No.2, (July 2010): 1.

<sup>11</sup> Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> “African Report” in *Third World Theologies; Commonalities and Divergence: Papers and Reflections from the Second General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, December, 1986, Oaxtepec, Mexico, edited by K.C. Abraham (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1986, 1990), 56.

With the presence of Christianity in Africa, the degree to which Africans have continued to endure misery unabated – in both life and death – is unacceptable. This chapter is an assessment of the church in Africa’s need for a positive turnaround, a holistic transformation and development.

Nothing will change if the African church does not grasp its remnant place in Africa and work on subverting the old order by infusing it with the new order, which Jesus has introduced in the world. Yet, it is extremely hard to convince anyone that the church in Africa is a remnant. The exponential growth of the church in Africa is undebatable. From Africa’s independence in the 1950s and 1960s, all strands of Christian denominations – Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians and independent churches – have continued to experience extraordinary growth. As the continent’s population numbers continue to surge, Christian numbers are also increasing in an unprecedented manner. Yet, the impact of the Christian faith in the continent does not seem commensurate with the growth of the church. When Philips Jenkins told the world that Africa had become the epicentre of the Christian faith, we went into jubilation. We were overwhelmed with celebration to the extent that we failed to ask what specific responsibilities that growth put on the African church. To grasp the degree of the expectation that the African peoples have on what the church can achieve in the continent is to realise that Africa has found itself in a religious, social, cultural, political, economic and philosophical quagmire whereby it needs the church to give the African peoples a future with hope. What that means is succinctly summarised by a reflection paper presented by African theologians at the Second General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians meeting (which was held in an awfully long time ago!). It indicates that not much has changed since then, if that is your point. Without mincing words, the African theologians at the meeting seemed to have demonstrated an awareness of the task before the African church. They reported that:

*The role to be played by the church is evident because human conditions and institutions of the period subsequent to colonisation are deteriorating fast. It would not be too much to say that the church appears to be the only solution to the general distress in certain African countries. However, it would be childish to fall straight forward into self-satisfaction. Although the mission of the church in Africa is great, the real situation of the church, on the other hand,*

*is dramatic. For the African church is intimately tied to the future of the African continent, which is now about to drown. If Africa sinks, the African church will sink with it. The assertion of that reality is the major mission of the African church.*<sup>13</sup>

This is an apt assessment of the responsibility of the African church to the African peoples. However, that vision is to some extent a mirage. It has not been sustained. Africa has many competitive realities and challenges that have made the church a remnant. As it is, the task of the church in any given society is holistic. It is fundamentally involved in saving souls, saving their minds and their sociological and anthropological contexts. It is a holistic task because it involves partnering with the incarnate Jesus Christ, through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, to reposition and transform every social structure and institution that serves as an impasse to the abundant life that Christ promises all those who will place saving faith in him (John 10:10). In spite of its phenomenal growth, the African church has remained a remnant. Its existential experiences since colonialism, independence, post-independence and the present ongoing neo-colonialism.

In spite of the growth of the church in Africa, Christianity has not really demonstrated the tremendous potentials it has shown in other contexts.<sup>14</sup>

One of the reasons Christ came into this world is to destroy the works of the devil, so that ordinary humans like us can nurture and promote the civilisation of love and inclusiveness. But why is the African church still a remnant? African scholars have tended to argue that one of the many reasons is the way the church was planted. The gospel was proclaimed to Africa by a people who did not respect the God-given cultural values of the Africans. Everything about African cultural values was not important – it was considered inferior to their own superior culture. Thus, in Africa:

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<sup>13</sup> K. C. Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences: Papers and Reflections from the Second General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, December, 1986, Oaxtepec, Mexico*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1990), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies*, 36.

The Christian faith, as transmitted by missionaries, is completely coated in its Western cultural straitjacket. Too intellectual, too judicial, too much of a stranger to day-to-day life problems, the revived doctrine becomes a Sunday dress worn to church. At home, at the farm, on the job, we put on once more our ordinary dress for current business. Those day-to-day problems are sickness, infertility of wife or cattle, a neighbour's jealousy, scarce or abundant rainfall, the drought which burns farms, luck in hunting, success in business, a victory over an enemy, bad luck, all kinds of powers, wizards, soothsayers, healers, etc.<sup>15</sup>

This tradition of lack of paying close attention to what the African peoples are going through as their daily existential experiences is still here. The African church has largely remained silent in the face of overwhelming human rights abuse of women, widows, children, orphans, the poor and the weak. One of Africa's feminist theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, rightly observed that, "[T]he church of Christ is God's instrument for the liberation of the human spirit and for demonstrating the first fruits of the God's Reign."<sup>16</sup> When we take a close look at the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious challenges that the African peoples are going through today, we can't help but conclude that the African church is a remnant, if what Oduyoye said is right, and I believe she is. Compared with its counterpart, the Asian church, which is just a little above 3% of the population of the continent, and yet is speaking out against social, cultural, political, religious and economic injustices, the African church situation is unacceptable.

By and large, the African church needs to become aware of its fragility. By all standards, the African church is a remnant. In 2002 the Christian population in Nigeria was only 40%, and Islam was 45%. The spread of Christianity in Africa is not in question. In many respects, the contemporary spread of the church in Africa is unprecedented. Although most of North Africa is predominantly Islamic, other parts of Africa, however, have embraced the Christian faith. For example, Wikipedia has noted that, "Christianity is embraced by the majority

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<sup>15</sup> Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies*, 39

<sup>16</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Commonalities: An African Perspective" in Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies*, 104.



of the population in most Southern African, Southeast African, and Central African States and others in some parts of the Horn of Africa and West African.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the spread is dramatic and visible in many African countries with an explosion in terms of the number of “church denominations and structures across urban centres and even in rural areas. In some cases, mega-church sites are morphing into cities, complete with housing estates, banks, grocery stores and police stations. Beyond dominant architecture, the prominence of Christianity is often visible in other ways, in Ghana, for instance, small and medium scale businesses are often named based on biblical verses.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, what seem to be a missing link is that the church in every region does not grasp its holistic responsibility. Due to many decades of exploitation, oppression and marginalization, the African church came into being with a tremendous sense of powerlessness, a shallow faith. And as the church continues to face the storms of life, it seems as if Jesus is still asking the African church the question he asked his disciples when they faced a similar threatening situation, “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25) For the African church to bring good news to the society and its immediate members, it needs to have a renewed confidence in the God whose power is incomparably great (Ephesians 1:18-23). The African church needs to realise that the role of the church involves, among other things, nation building and concrete contribution to the welfare of the [secular] states in Africa.<sup>19</sup>

The African church needs to follow a cue from its Asian counterpart that takes into consideration the cries and groans of the suffering of its masses of people who are politically oppressed. Their people are made to feel powerless and economically exploited across the Asian continent. The Asian approach to the plight of the masses reminds the church that it needs to understand Christ’s suffering as holistic – socially, culturally, politically, economically and spiritually. For instance, Dr Kim Yong Bock, Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development, once argued: “Christian theology has traditionally underestimated the seriousness of social evil, a mistake caused by its attempt to understand sin and evil in individual, spiritual or

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<sup>17</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_Africa/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Africa/). Culled on 4 July, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> [qz.com/Africa/1587317/how-many-christians-live-in-Africa/](https://qz.com/Africa/1587317/how-many-christians-live-in-Africa/). Culled 4 July, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Bong Rin Ro, “Theological Trends in Asia” Vol. 13-Issue 2, pp.4-5.

metaphysical terms.”<sup>20</sup> I see this as one of the problems that make the church in Africa a remnant church.

## **Why the African church remains a remnant despite the growth of Christianity**

How can we convince anyone that the church in Africa is to a large extent a remnant? Is it not true that, “The church of Christ is God’s instrument for the liberation of the human spirit and for demonstrating the first fruits of God’s Reign.”?<sup>21</sup> Yes, it is absolutely true. But why is Africa still a continent whose masses suffer systemic social and cultural injustices, economic exploitation and extraordinary human misery under the watchful eyes of the church, which is said to be God’s instrument of socio-economic justice, socio-political order and socio-spiritual freedom, transformation and development? Is the church, its members and clergy not aware that Africans’ misery is largely man-made? There are basically two categories of theologians in Africa.

On the one hand, there are those who have not grasped the role of the gospel in social transformation. That is, they are not able to perceive the symbiotic relationship between the gospel of salvation, saving souls and the work of social engagement. They tend to completely reject social action. This group seems to be in the majority in Africa, because the missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa, came during the time of a one-sided emphasis on personal conversion to the detriment of social action. Rather, they tended to assume that to be involved in the gospel of social transformation is to be involved in something that undercut our true calling. Thus, many Christian leaders in Africa are in the category that believe that the gospel does not have a social action dimension. They identify salvation primarily with spiritual conversion and view liberation theology as focusing only on a “social gospel”, and therefore deviating from the biblical message.

On the other hand, there is a remnant group of African evangelicals who insist that the gospel requires Christian involvement not only in the process of saving

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<sup>20</sup> Kim Yong Bock, “Theology and the Social Biography of the Minjung”, in *CTC Bulletin* (April 1985), 74.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham, *Third World Theologies*, 32.

souls, but also in the process of saving their minds, their worldview; that is, involvement in both liberation and social transformation. For this remnant, sin is both personal and social, both spiritual and natural, both individual and structural.

It seems clear to me that it is this polarisation that is one of the issues that has made the African church a remnant, in a social context, which is threatened and in fact under siege. Therefore, it requires us to recognise the radically holistic nature and scope of Jesus' ministry. As Mugambi insists, if we take a critical look at Jesus' ministry, we will undoubtedly realise that it was both a ministry of personal and social transformation.<sup>22</sup> As such "salvation and liberation are theologically compatible." Thus, he wrote that in the African context and in the Bible salvation, as a socio-political concept, cannot be complete without liberation as a theological concept. Thus Jesus, proclaiming his mission, quoted from the book of Isaiah to indicate the correctness and relevance of his concern (Isaiah 61:1-4). To escape from its present remnant status, the African church must seek an integrated approach to the gospel, which overcomes the polarisation between liberation and salvation paradigms. For example, Diane Stinton has cited how it can be proved beyond reasonable doubt that Africans' spiritual, economic, cultural, political and social underdevelopment,

[I]s artificially created by the pauperisation of some as a result of the enrichment of others. It is not a secret to anybody that our underdevelopment develops the developed countries. First of all, this is because our economy is located on the periphery, with the North and the West being the centre. Our whole wealth is intended for rich countries. The subsoil's resources and the agricultural products are exploited, their extraction and their production being a prime concern of the developed nations. Products for local consumptions are mostly imported, whereas the food-producing farms are sacrificed for agribusiness. The situation gets worse with the notorious deterioration in the farms of exchange. Prices of raw materials are fixed by the developed

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<sup>22</sup> J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 33.

countries without taking into account the real needs of African workers.” The neocolonial movement spearheaded by the Chinese has joined heads with the already existing “world monetary system which is a very skilful machinery for exploitation, domination, and systematic pauperisation of the Third World countries.”<sup>23</sup>

This lament forces us to ask the question, “What is the specific relevance of the Christ of the African church to life in contemporary Africa?” One of Africa’s finest theological minds from Kenya, J.N.K. Mugambi, has trouble accepting that the whole gamut of Africa’s religiosity has not made enough impact as its potentials indicated. The African church has not attained its full potentials. In her research on this matter, Diane Stinton discovered that Mugambi fundamentally sees Africa as continent of paradoxes. He poignantly expressed the paradox of Africa being the most “religious” and specifically “Christian” continent at the end of the twentieth century, while “its peoples remain the most abused of all in history.”<sup>24</sup> To make the desirable impact that the African church has the potentials of making, Mugambi calls for social reconstruction at three levels: personal, cultural, and communal. At the cultural, personal and communal levels of reconstruction, Mugambi argued that the liberal model has become outmoded. According to him, we now “need to shift paradigms from the Post-Exodus to Post-Exile imagery, with reconstruction as the resultant theological axiom.” Stinton understands this to mean that, “Since the 1990s were viewed as a decade of reconstruction in many areas, such as constitutional reforms and economic revitalisation, African theology was called to play a culturally reconstructive role like that of Protestant theology during the European Renaissance and Reformation.”<sup>25</sup> Mugambi argued that Jesus’ mission in Israel was profoundly reconstructive in nature and scope. In other words, if we pay attention to Jesus’ ministry, we will realise that it was essentially a reconstruction of Judaism rather than deconstructive. He cited the example of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) as “the most basic

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<sup>23</sup> Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christologies*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 222.

<sup>24</sup> Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 33 in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 223.

<sup>25</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 223

of all reconstructive theological texts in the synoptic gospels.”<sup>26</sup> In his analysis of Jesus’ mission, Mugambi sees reconstruction at the following levels: personal, cultural and ecclesial.<sup>27</sup> Stinton tells of how Mugambi offers evidence in Jesus’ teaching regarding the need for transforming personal motives and intentions in order to produce constructive change. Following examples from Matthew and Luke, Mugambi concludes that, “The key to social transformation is appropriate disposition of the individual members of the community concerned, especially its leaders.” Mugambi is fully aware that St. Paul has said that God has invited us into partnership with his Son (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). The churches of Africa are challenged by the scriptures to continually act as God’s witnesses on earth in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we affirm to be Christ. Each Christian is challenged to act upon this challenge and endeavour to make it a reality. Do we witness with despair, or with hope?

Mugambi is not alone in calling for African theologians to engage the African social context. Mercy Oduyoye of Ghana, in her reflection on the reconstruction of Africa, writes: “The future of the Church in Africa is dependent on its ability to embark afresh on the mission of Christ in Africa.”<sup>28</sup> She argued that: “The mission of Christ is a critical and an important mission. It therefore requires Christians responding to all the poverties of human life.”<sup>29</sup>

Grasping Oduyoye’s explanation, Diane Stinton believes that it means ensuring that the gospel is, “Set in the context of the real lives of the people to whom it is delivered” and that it makes a difference to those lives. Oduyoye further stresses that “a visit of both ecclesiology and spirituality is urgent for the theological enterprise of the African church. The viability of this reconstruction

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<sup>26</sup> Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 13 in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 224.

<sup>27</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 224.

<sup>28</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Church of the Future in Africa: Its Mission and Theology”, in *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi (Nairobi: AACC, 1997), 73 cited by Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 225.

<sup>29</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Church of the Future in Africa: Its Mission and Theology”, in *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi (Nairobi: AACC, 1997), 73 cited by Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 225.

will depend upon the development of a dynamic Christology.”<sup>30</sup> The African church needs to grasp Jesus’ radical approach to the mission of the God (Isaiah 61:1-2a). The fruits of the kingdom of God – the whole gamut of the blessings of the kingdom – is what is in mind here. For Saint Paul succinctly points out: “I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:23 NLT)

I read this phrase in my personal devotional time one day, and I could not help but ask, what does Paul really mean by this phrase “To spread the Good News and share in its blessings”? How does this help me to grasp the situation the church in Africa is in? On face value, I understood it to mean that it is one thing to celebrate the unprecedented growth and spread of the Good News in Africa, but it is also an entirely different ball game to actually share in its blessings. The Good News has two sides like a coin: Spreading it and participating in its contemporary transformational and developmental fruits. In this case, I can convincingly say that the Africa church is a remnant. For although Christianity has continued to enjoy unprecedented growth and spread in the global South, Africa, Latin America and some parts of Asia, in many respects the church is still a remnant in its impact on the social, cultural, political, economic and moral landscape or worldview of the continent. If we compare the African church to how the Gospel turned its first century society upside-down and what it did went to Western Europe, particularly during the ministry of John Wesley, we can definitely agree that the church in Africa is a remnant. Undoubtedly, African Christians know how to spread the Good News like Paul, but they rarely know how to fully share in its blessings. What are those blessings of the Good News that we are missing? This is one of the tasks before us in this article. In what way can we justify the thrust of this article: The church in Africa as a remnant church? To justify it we have to look at available models.

### ***Lessons from a Latin American model***

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to

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<sup>30</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Church of the Future in Africa: Its Mission and Theology”, in *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi (Nairobi: AACC, 1997), 73 cited by Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 225.

those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour... (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2a RSV)

Although this model has been around for quite a while, its lessons are still fresh. The text above is generally accepted as the express mind of Christ for ministry or Christ's manifesto for the mission of God. The Latin American model helps us to glean significant insights about what having the mind of Christ in Africa may entail. The African church does not need to reinvent the wheel. It has a lot to learn from its counterparts in Latin America. Of course, African theologians have used or adopted the liberation model before in their theological reflection. However, I do not think that they have done enough to warrant stopping the ongoing socio-economic and socio-political injustices in the continent. In this section we will concentrate on the Latin American theologians' interpretation of who Jesus is.

Jesus's incarnation, life and ministry provide the template which the church needs to do well in every continent of the world. Our relevance depends largely on our perception of our history and its connection with the incarnated Christ's ministry which he announced in Luke 4:18-19. One of the reasons that the resurrected Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into his disciples was that our personal life and public and social life would be characterised by a "demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:4-5) We need to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit so that he can open our inner eyes to enable us to discern the nature and scope of our generation's human evil or its realities in our context. In this respect, I find Latin American Christology very rich and refreshing. Generally speaking, our perception of who Jesus is often informs and shapes what we do in private and public. Any image of Jesus Christ we create in our minds usually emanates from our lived experiences or our existential narrative. In his article, "Christologies<sup>31</sup> of Latin America", Jose Miguez Bonino states, "The understanding of Jesus Christ of a given church, time, or people cannot be limited to their theological (dogmatic) definition, but is also seen in the place that Christ plays in their faith, their religious

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<sup>31</sup> Jose Miguez Bonino, "Latin American Christologies" in Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah editors, *Dictionary of Their world Theologies*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 54.

attitudes, their piety, their iconography, their celebrations, and even their folklore. In this sense, there have been and are very different ‘faces of Christ’ in Latin America.” Based on their understanding of Christ’s salvific programme on earth, Latin America opted for an alternative to theological reflection that gave them a deeper understanding of the nature and scope of liberation. They understand liberation comprehensively. For example, Gustavo Gutierrez underscores the many dimensions of economic dependency by describing three interdependent levels of liberation – which include, but are not limited to, liberation in the economic and political sphere, liberation from dehumanisation, and liberation from sin.<sup>32</sup> The liberationists’ understanding of the holistic nature of theology have been distilled as follows:

First, liberation from socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious structures of injustices. At this level of liberation, the theologians address the matter of the oppression of the poor by the rich, workers by owners, and majority by minority which is institutionalised by unjust economic, political, and social structures. Gutierrez argues that liberation on this level requires a structural transformation to create economic, political, and social freedom for the majority.

Second, liberation from dehumanising structures. At this level of liberation, the theologian addresses the oppression of dehumanisation which “marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it.”<sup>33</sup> Here Paulo Freire is very helpful. He explains how a culture of silence dehumanises the poor and oppressed in Latin America because they lack a critical consciousness of who they are and what their destiny as a subject, not an object, might be. Liberation allows them the freedom to voice the silence and to follow their “vocation of becoming more fully human.”<sup>34</sup>

Third level is a liberation from the structure of sin. At this level liberation theologians see sin as the ultimate cause of all injustices and oppression for

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<sup>32</sup> As cited in Priscilla and John R. Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>33</sup> As cited in Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> As cited in Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 35.



individuals and society; it infiltrates every dimension of human life and creation. Liberation from sin enables true community with God and with neighbour to become a reality.<sup>35</sup>

Where is Jesus in all of these three levels of a Latin American interpretation of liberation? Jesus Christ is undoubtedly seen as the ultimate liberator in all three. What is the evidence for this claim? First, during his earthly ministry, Jesus fought economic structures with his teaching, such as the parable of the workers who laboured for different lengths of time but earned the same wage (Matthew 20:1-16). This parable is a frontal attack on the view that those with more money deserve it and, concomitantly, that the poor deserve their low economic status.<sup>36</sup> Second, Jesus Christ fought social structures by eating meals with so-called sinners and prostitutes. Third, Jesus Christ fought dehumanisation by placing human need above even the most sacred traditions such as Sabbath purity (Mark 2:23-3:6). Fourth, the poor and the oppressed were conscientized in his presence. For instance, blind Bartimaeus, whom the crowds silenced, was given voice and healed by Jesus. (Mark 10:46-52). An unnamed woman with a flow of blood and no financial resources touched Jesus and subsequently “told him the whole truth” (Mark 5:25-34). Fifth, Jesus fought sin by denouncing everything – whether religious, political, economic, or social – that alienated people from God and from their neighbour. In short, the ultimate project of Jesus was “to proclaim and be the instrument of the concrete realisation of the absolute meaning of the world: i.e., liberation from every stigma (including suffering, division, sin and death) and liberation for real life, for open-ended communication love, grace, and plenitude in God.”<sup>37</sup> That infers that Latin American liberation theology is emphasising holistic liberation. Liberation needed at all the different dimensions of life includes, among other things, “the social, the political, the economic, the cultural, the religious and all their interrelationships.”<sup>38</sup> It seems to me that one of the reasons why the African church is still a remnant is the political and cultural hierarchical perspective of its theology and structures in the continent. A church which is still confused as to whether or not its responsibility includes

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<sup>35</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 5.

giving a voice to the voiceless by combining evangelism and social action, faith and reason, is not following St. Paul's command to, "Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything with love." (1 Corinthians 16:13-14 NLT) Without the African church being on guard, standing firm in its faith, being courageous and strong and doing everything with love for human flourishing of the poor, it will remain a remnant in the midst of its progress. As I have said so far, the African church focuses on culture and identity, which is okay. But it has left out other important core social, political, and economic values such as the need to decry corruption and impunity, the outright violation of the human rights of the masses and vulnerable members of our society – women and children, widows and orphans, the poor of the poorest, the ethnic, political and religious minorities. One of the major problems is the African church attachment to hierarchical church structure, which has made it difficult for its adherents to see it as a "popular church." History is repeating itself, so to speak. "The church itself, which was supposed to be a new social ethic, became very comfortable with wealth and possession after Constantine make it the state religion in A. D. 313. We moved from underground catacombs to princely basilicas."<sup>39</sup> Rohr is right when he says, "Those who stay on the side of power have consistently misused and misinterpreted the gospel."<sup>40</sup> They often become blind to the plight of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. Thus, the African church needs to carefully re-evaluate and rethink its hierarchal structures so as to come to terms with the existential realities and experiences of its members. After many decades of independence, Africans are still not integrated. The reason is that they are still divided along tribal and ethnic lines. This situation has created an impasse to all sort of developmental strides on the continent.

### ***The model of African Nationalists***

The African founding fathers had a vision of a united Africa. For example, in Kenya and Nigeria the founding fathers did their best to restore the rapid erosion of community consciousness. Some of the measures that were put in place included the development and crafting and the inscribing of the philosophy of peace, love and unity in their national anthems and national

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media 1996), 24.

<sup>40</sup> Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World*, 24.

pledges.<sup>41</sup> This philosophy was based on the desire to build a united and prosperous continent. The African church is fortunate to be in a continent where many of the different national anthems and pledges are theologically inclined. The founding fathers “recognize God as the creator of the universe”. Many of them also acknowledge that national blessings proceed from God, the Almighty Creator of all the galaxies and the Sustainer of the entire universe. As it is said “The National anthem is clearly a prayer for unity, peace and liberty.”<sup>42</sup> Of course, these core values – unity, peace, and liberty – are God’s revealed ethical and moral vision for society. Given that the African church has not paid attention to such an awesome opportunity, it has not taken advantage of this moral potential, which could have served as an impetus for political, social and economic engagement with the powers that be. Therefore, in many respects, it has failed to call to question the oppressive political, economic, social or cultural structures in Africa. This situation of failure has lent credence to its remnant mentality, which has caused it to lose sight of its God-given potential to reposition and subvert the old order that is detrimental to human flourishing in Africa. For instance, the political elites and the few rich elites that have become “rentiers” to use Guy Standing’s term, cannot call them to their God-given vocation – order, justice, freedom and peace and unity. By this failure, which is largely due to what Ron Sider calls, a one-sided Christian<sup>43</sup>, a Christianity that divorces evangelism from social action, the church has demonstrated that it has accepted a remnant status quo, in spite of its phenomenal growth and size, its social and political impact is not commensurate with its unprecedented growth.

### ***The African theological model: political and prophetic critique***

Jesus’ legacy of political and prophetic critique of inhumane social structures and unjust political regimes is exemplified by African Christian leaders who stood against those who perpetuated ingrained social structures of economic exploitation, impoverishment, and marginalization, and leaving their victims with no option, but to remain politically and socially voiceless, and economically powerless. Their existential experience is characterised by

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<sup>41</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in Age of Hunger: Moving From Affluence to Generosity*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 5.

suffering, pain and death. African is not in short supply of men and women who have understood Jesus' vision of a new world order. As Rohr noted, "Jesus' new world order is utterly subverting the old-world order. This is what makes people so furious: Jesus simply ignores the systems of values and righteousness that are so important to them."<sup>44</sup> Jesus' focus was in repositioning their mindset to focus on "what is really Real—the "Kingdom" experience, which is the heart of Jesus' teaching. "It's Reality with a capital R, the very bottom line, the pattern-that-connects. It's the goal of all true religion, the experience of the Absolute, the Eternal, what is. The Kingdom is Jesus' way of describing God's dream for the world."<sup>45</sup> The problem is that Christ's subversive attack on the old order through prophetic critique, which has been demonstrated by prophetic voices of African leaders like Kenyans Archbishop David Gitari and Archbishop John Okullu, have been sustained. That is, the prophetic ministry of Archbishop David Gitari, Archbishop John Okullu and Desmond Tutu of South Africa and/or a host of others on the continent have not quite been sustained. Contemporary African clergy exert enormous influence on both church and society. Thus, based on the influence that African clergies exert on society in the continent, we can argue that the African church has a political potential to the State to bring political and economic transformation. In many respects, the Catholic, Protestant evangelicals, and the Pentecostal leaders of some African countries maintain intimate ties with the ruling regimes to the extent that they can be used to defend the status quo to the detriment of their members. Other clergies who exert enormous influence and garner respect have chosen to focus on protecting their prestige and self-interest instead of speaking out against the social ills devastating society. As a result of their silent stance, they implicitly put their political involvement behind the perpetuation of the systemic structures of injustice which benefits a minority instead of the majority of the poor in the continent. Corollary attention to the Jesus' ministry will show the African church that it needs not only to do everything with love but also that because of its love for Christ and his Kingdom values it must get involved in political and prophetic critique of all inhumane structures and systems that have continued to make the majority of African voiceless, powerless and despairing. Many African peoples live in the situation of incredible religious, cultural, social, economic

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<sup>44</sup> Rohr, *Jesus' Plan For a New World*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Rohr, *Jesus' Plan For a New World*, 29.

and political uncertainty. Unlike the Latin Americans, who in their preferential option for the poor paid attention on Jesus' ministry and argued that Jesus rejected a purely spiritual message that placed the reigns of God into the future and asked people to wait passively for it,<sup>46</sup> the African church and its theologians, by and large lack such a focus. Only a remnant of the African theologians has been able to realise the holistic nature of their ministry. The majority needs to learn from the liberation theologians who have argued that a careful reading of the Gospels shows that during his earthly ministry, Jesus placed the reign of God in the people's very midst through proclamation, healing, and exorcism (Luke 17:20-21). They further pointed out that Jesus equally rejected a purely political role at the time, which manifested itself in three currents: prophetic in the appearance of the Messiah in the desert; sacerdotal, in the manifestation of the Liberator in the Temple; and political, in the revelation of the Messiah on the mountain of God. (Matt. 4:1-11).<sup>47</sup>

## **A radical spirituality**

For the African church to overcome its present social status of being a remnant, it needs a radical grasp of Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality does not have any dichotomy between sacred and secular. Its bearers realise that they engage in the ministry of propagating the kingdom of God by his mercy. Thus, all they are doing is meant to be a way of reciprocating the many favours, benefits and opportunities they are enjoying through their faith in Christ. For example, in his article, "Spirituality Today", John Risley asserts that, "When Christians, in their struggle to create a just society, turn to the historical Jesus and make a preferential option to support the poor, a spirituality of liberation emerges."<sup>48</sup> Latin American theologians arrived at this option by many decades of carefully reflecting on their Christian faith and its implication and impact on the social or existential experiences of the masses in the Americas. Spirituality, according to, John Sorino, has to do with the "correct relation of the subject with history, of the spirit of the subject with the proper,

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<sup>46</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Pope-Levison, *Jesus in Global Context*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> John Risley, "Liberation Spirituality, in *Spirituality Today*, Summer 1983, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp.117-126.

objective weight of history, with its proper spirit.”<sup>49</sup> Taking a cue from Latin America may enable the African church to also reflect more concretely on its own experience of God and his coming kingdom. For instance, a truly African spirituality, rooted in its particular social, historical reality, could be a great source for renewal and liberation, decolonisation, reconstruction, and transformation for the African church.

## Conclusion

In this article we have basically argued that, it is one thing for the African church to experience exponential growth to the extent that the future of Christianity in the continent is secured, particularly as the countries in the continent witness continuing explosive growth. Nevertheless, it is whole different thing for the growth to be commensurate with the enormous pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial challenges the whole continent continues to wrestle with. Past and present realities of systemic injustices have left the continent not only as a prey of neo-colonialism but also as real victim of dire poverty, corruption, intra-communal violent conflicts, intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts, gender-based violence, human rights abuses, extra-judicial killings, terrorism, climate change, etc. These moral vices have made it extremely difficult for the African masses to enjoy true de-colonisation and independence. The historical tradition of Christianity is that it is a bringer of good news to the poor and weak, the oppressed, the marginalised, the voiceless and the powerless. Citing the prophet Isaiah, , Jesus Christ, proclaims, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour...” (Isaiah 61:1-2a; Luke 4:18-19 RSV). It is this mission of God that helps the church to be an instrument of God that gives hope to those who are hurting and have been made to believe that they have no dignity. That enable them hope to correct their self-destructive naive acceptance of the image of inferiority.

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<sup>49</sup> John Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroad: A Latin American Approach*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1979),

Although the majority of African Christian denominations are silent in the face of extreme exploitation, oppression, marginalisation and so on, there is a remnant made up of evangelical church individuals and organisations who are not silent. They are making fervent efforts to advance justice, just-peacemaking, and promote moral high living throughout the continent. For example, some African public theologians are working with the African theological institutions who are members of Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) and their churches through the publication of an African Public Theology textbook in 2020, which will help them to infuse a new fresh consciousness that reflects Africa Union’s Agenda 2063 – The Africa We Want (the Africa God Wants) – a strategic framework for growth and sustainability. The Association of Evangelicals in Africa has come up with a vision that is aligned with Agenda 2063. So, the African church has no excuse for remaining a remnant. It has models in the lives of the late Archbishop David Gitari of Kenya and Archbishop John Okullu of Kenya, both of whom were Anglican clergies. They both stood with the masses and fought for the true freedom of the masses from their governments detrimental public policies. The African church needs this prayer from Psalm 82 by Yohanna Katanacho:

O Lord! You want justice and want us to walk in its footsteps (v.2). You care for the orphan, the poor, and the widowed (v.3). Empower me to become an eye for the blind and a tear for those who sit in darkness. Turn me into legs for the crippled and for those who suffer immobility. Enable me to be a mother for the poor and for orphans. Give me the strength to be a voice for the mute and for those whose tongues have been silenced. I desire to be a home for a homeless nation. I want to be a comforting smile during a season of sadness, a moment of rest in an eternity of torture. May I become a garment of mercy for the helpless.

My world has become an island of the rich surrounded by a sea of the poor. Half the people on earth live below the poverty line; many are living on less than a dollar a day. They lack water, homes, and education. Without the eye of justice, we don’t see their plight; without the ear of mercy, we don’t hear their voice. Should we enjoy our island of richness and ignore the waves crashing on our beach, waves full of pain, weakness, and poverty?

Our neighbours are sinking in a sea of sorrows. They want justice and search for it.

“Who is my neighbour?” the church continues to ask. But I plead for justice and seek to walk in it. O God, rise up and transform your church to become a seeker of justice who walks in its path (v. 8). Help me today to wake up from the drunken seeking of riches so that I can start showing mercy to the weak, the orphan, the widow, the handicapped, the refugees, and the unemployed. Help me to seek justice for poor nations, for their sons and daughters.<sup>50</sup>

Amen, Amen!

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<sup>50</sup> Yohanna Katanacho, *Praying Through the Psalms*, (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2018), 163.