UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

University of Birmingham
Research at Birmingham

African-initiated Pentecostal Churches in East London
Fesenmyer, Leslie

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

African Pentecostal Churches in East London

Pentecostal churches defy current religious trends in the United Kingdom. Over the last three decades, the country has witnessed a decline in Christian affiliation, along with an increase in the number of people who identify as non-religious and also an increase in people with religious affiliations other than Christian.[1] Yet, between 2005 and 2012, Evangelical churches showed a 30% increase, accounting for just over half (52%) of all churchgoers in London; Black-Majority Churches (Pentecostal) account for much of this growth.[2]

Project overview

Funded by the ESRC, this three-year project (2013-2016) examined modes of migrant identification and processes of migrant incorporation through the lens of religion. It focused specifically on Pentecostal Christianity among migrants from Kenya living in London, who constitute part of the growing and diversifying 'new' African diaspora in the UK. A key question it considered was: what role, if any, do the Pentecostal churches they have founded in London (seek to) play in wider British society? This ethnographic study entailed participant observation in Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches, particularly in the boroughs of Newham and Barking and Dagenham; and ongoing conversations with pastors and congregants, as well as meetings with faith, migrant, and community organisations, non-Pentecostal Christian leaders, and local council staff.

Profile of churches

Out of 17 Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches in Greater London in 2014, four churches are in Newham, an additional six are in Barking and Dagenham, with the remainder located in other parts of the city. The churches range in age from a few years old to more than a decade. Almost all of them are independent, as opposed to branches of larger churches based in Kenya. They range in size from approximately 30 to 250 members, with young families predominating in the congregations. Typically, they hold at least one service on Sundays, while many also have prayer meetings, Bible study groups, and men's, women's, and youth fellowships. English is the primary language of church services and activities. In addition to fostering communities of belonging and mutual support, the churches play an important role in marking life-course events, such as birth, marriage and death.

Key findings

Membership and community: Inclusive and exclusive

The churches identify as multicultural and see their congregants as international. Nonetheless, while members come from other African countries and elsewhere, one nationality, Kenyan, predominates in the congregations. Rather than 'default' to attending a nearby church, many members travel from neighbouring boroughs, other parts of London, and beyond. Their willingness to travel is seen as a testament to their dedication to God. The communities they form cannot be understood in terms of locality, but rather as self-identified Christian ones.

Cultivating presence: Tangible and virtual

Having a building of their own is an aspiration of most churches for symbolic and pragmatic reasons. Yet securing affordable space is a major challenge, so churches rent worship space in schools, community and leisure centres, and other churches. At the same time, the churches cultivate a virtual presence through their websites, and some also stream their services. Meanwhile, WhatsApp (messaging and telephony application for smartphones) and social media are key means by which members stay in touch and organise themselves.

Relational model of change

Members view religion as referring to their personal relationship with God. They seek to share their experiences with others, so that they too can 'know God's love'. And, they try to live their lives according to the Word of God. In endeavouring to conduct themselves in morally upstanding ways, they hope to inspire others to mirror their ways of being and emulate their successes. In other words, they aim to serve as individual models for the kind of society they seek to create.

Individually-focused social engagement

Their relationship with God motivates their social engagement. The churches conduct various activities, including offering classes, talks, and workshops on nutrition, health, (higher) education, budgeting, parenting, CV-writing, job search skills, and starting a business; providing meals for and food to those in need; tutoring; and coaching youth sports teams. Typically small-scale, often one-off, activities, they focus on developing the potential of each individual participant. Activities promote entrepreneurialism: members are encouraged to cultivate their unique talents and, in turn, generate opportunities that benefit others.

···

Conclusions and policy recommendations

1. The churches operate differently from the parish-based model of the Church of England. The mobility of congregants and 'gathered' model of the churches pose challenges to the work of locality-based councils, and contrast with the more limited mobility of many other residents in the boroughs where they live or worship.

2. Although church congregations are typically dominated by one nationality, they aspire to be international. There is a tension between the perception of such churches as 'communities of belonging' helping (im)migrants to integrate and as ethno-religious institutions closed to 'others'. While councils do not generally want to support activities that benefit a single identity-based group, inclusion and exclusion must be understood as relational social processes, generated by the perspectives and practices of both church members and those who are not members.

3. The churches are generally unaware of local voluntary organisations with which they could work or to whom they could direct their members. Central government cuts to local authority funding in both boroughs have constrained the efforts of umbrella groups and coordinating bodies to play such roles and help churches develop organisationally.

4. Church activities are dependent on the volunteer labour of members who have multiple demands on their time. This poses challenges in terms of the scale and duration of initiatives, as well as awareness of opportunities for collaboration and exchange.

5. Lack of their own spaces means that many churches are transient and their presence ephemeral. This can create additional barriers to reaching out to local communities and forging relationships with other organisations.

6. Social action is motivated by their personal relationship to God and expressive of it. Concerns about the role of evangelising in social engagement needs to take into account this perspective because religion cannot be disentangled from their social initiatives.

7. A relational model of change focused on the individual can have a powerful impact on the lives of particular people. Though these efforts are not scale-able, they can complement larger initiatives of statutory agencies and voluntary organisations.

---

1. British Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life. 2015. Living with Difference: Community, Diversity, and the Common Good. Cambridge: Woolf Institute, pp. 15-16.

2. Brierly, Peter. 2013. London's Churches are Growing: What the London Church Census Reveals. Tonbridge: ADBC, pp. 6, 3.