

A watercolor-style map of the African continent is centered on a light cream background. The map is rendered in shades of green, with blue lines representing rivers and orange-brown strokes representing coastlines. The text is overlaid on the map.

The Staggering Growth of  
**CHRISTIANITY**  
in **AFRICA**



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# THE FUTURE HUB OF CHRISTIANITY

To Christians in the West, it may feel like global Christianity is at an all-time low. By observing the events and trends around us, it seems as though we are moving toward an increasingly post-Christian world. The truth is, though, that Christianity is still very much alive, but its hub is shifting.

Whereas Christianity used to be most densely populated around Europe, Latin America, and North America, the epicenter of Christianity is quickly becoming the continent of Africa — specifically, the sub-Saharan region. Today, 26 percent of all Christians live in Africa, and that number is expected to increase to 40 percent by 2060. By contrast, that number in Europe is expected to decline from 25 percent to 14 percent, and in North America, from 12 percent to 9 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Though Christianity was minimal across most African nations in the early 20th century, it has grown exponentially over the last 60 years. For example, in 1900, the population of Christians in Ethiopia was 6 million, and by 2050 it is expected to reach 100 million. In Nigeria, the growth is even more dramatic, going from 180,000 in 1900 to today's 80 million, also projected to reach 100 million by 2050.

## BUT HOW DID CHRISTIANITY BECOME SUCH A WIDESPREAD RELIGION SO QUICKLY?

Though Christianity in African nations can be traced all the way back to evangelism from the first apostles, the faith — surprisingly — experienced a boom after WWII, as colonial empires' resources were depleted, prompting them to draw back from African nations.

## “Unprecedented explosion of Christianity”

As a result, more than 50 newly independent nations were created, correlating with an “unprecedented explosion of Christianity” across the continent.<sup>2</sup> Many people assume missionary work and colonialism were inextricably linked, expecting the colonial powers to have taken Christianity with them when they left. But the truth of the gospel remained, having resonated in the hearts of people across Africa regardless of its entanglement with politics, and Christianity was embraced. Christians in Africa made their faith their own, developing their own leadership and worshipping God in their own way.





# PENTECOSTALISM IN AFRICA

**“Pentecostal aesthetic of prayer is an irruption of sensibilities. . .**

Christians in Africa have become increasingly Pentecostal and charismatic in denomination since the 1950s, with a particularly significant boost in the 1970s. However, the thread can be traced back as early as the late 19th century to what scholars call Ethiopianism, the emergence of African independent churches. Early leaders of this movement turned to black churches in the U.S. for inspiration, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>3</sup>

Ogbu Kalu, author of the book *African Pentecostalism*, views Ethiopianism as an early form of African Pentecostalism in the way that they are both an “expression of the interior of African spirituality.” Pentecostalism in Africa built on the legacies of Ethiopianism and the prophetic movements of the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

The characteristics of Pentecostalism align with many of the common sensibilities and perspectives of African cultures, and as a result, it has “become the spiritual and cultural switching node and heart of African Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> Prayer is one major way Pentecostalism is distinct from other movements of Christianity, and one that speaks to many of the characteristics and traditions present in African

cultures. It is not simply closing your eyes and speaking out loud to God. It is a fully engaged experience.

Pentecostal aesthetic of prayer is an irruption of sensibilities, sensory-motor skills, practical wisdom, and deep emotions for conveying everyday needs to the heavens and bridging the gap between the visible and invisible realms. Prayer is oral theology, biblical texts, ritual practices, and spontaneous and heady spirituality carried by and articulated through the body. African Pentecostal prayer is often an embodiment of traditional African celebration including physical, energetic, and dramatic expression of hopes, fears, and traditions.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of the charismatic movement brought Pentecostal teaching into existing denominations, influencing many Catholic and Protestant churches on the African continent. In the years following through the present, a wave of neo-Pentecostalism has evolved, bringing with it a movement of new, indigenous Pentecostal churches that are largely urban and young. These churches are expanding rapidly in Africa’s growing cities.<sup>7</sup> In 2015, Pentecostal Christians were estimated to make up 32 percent (about 202 million) of the 574.5 million Christians across African nations, and about 17 percent of the 1.7 billion people living on the continent.

# POPULATION GROWTH

Another primary reason for the rapid growth of Christianity is simply a matter of numbers. While the European population is aging, the population of African nations is, on the whole, younger, with a median age of just 19. Additionally, while the typical family size in Europe, the U.S., and other northern countries is declining, African family size is holding steady — and showing no signs of decline any time soon.

“Population growth persists in sections of the Middle East and South Asia, and above all in Africa. In 2015, birth rates of more than five children per woman in Uganda, Nigeria, and Ethiopia—and nearly five in Congo—suggest that this trend will not decline over the next few decades,” Pew research reports.<sup>8</sup>

Pew also notes the drastic shift in one staggering statistic: “in 1900, there were three Europeans for every African. By 2050, there should be three Africans for every European.”

The primary area in which Christianity has grown the most is sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in the eastern region. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, in 2015 alone, eastern Africa experienced a gain of 12 million Christians. The fastest projected growth rate from 2015-2050 is expected to take place in Burkina Faso at 3.34 percent annually, followed by Zambia and Tanzania at about 3 percent. As of 2015, the highest population of Christians in Africa are located in Nigeria at 84 million.

All of this growth means the number of Christians in Africa is projected to hit 700 million by 2025. Now home to 631 million Christians as of 2018, Africa now has the largest population of Christians in the world for the first time ever, beating out Latin America, which has 601 million.<sup>2</sup>

**“By 2050, there should be three Africans for every European.”**

If Western Christians are intentional about being a part of the global Church and engaging Christians around the world, they have to be aware of and interested in the growth of Christianity in Africa. While Christians in Africa are multiplying rapidly, most believers lack access to biblical resources written from a worldview resonant within their unique cultures that would empower them to go deeper in their faith and go on to disciple others. The number of Christians in Africa is growing faster than the number of leaders who are well equipped to disciple them. If we can invest in the Church in Africa in this way — encouraging and empowering Church leaders and pastors in Africa with the resources they need to disciple others — we invest in the global Church and future generations of believers worldwide.





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