



An Assessment of the Contributions of Africans to Ecumenism: Theological and Practical Perspectives

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Abstract	Original Research Article
This study examines Africans contributions to the ecumenical movement from theological and practical perspectives, with particular attention to ecclesiology, Christology, diakonia, interfaith relations, and social transformation within the Churches in Africa. The problem addressed in this work is the persistence of denominational rivalry, cultural tensions, ethnic divisions, and weak ecclesial cooperation in Africa, despite the rapid growth of Christianity on the continent. The study adopts a historical and analytical research method through the examination of relevant books, journal articles, conference reports, and ecumenical documents relating to African Christianity and the global ecumenical movement. Findings reveal that Africa has significantly enriched ecumenism through contextual theology, Ubuntu ecclesiology, missionary cooperation, liberation and reconstruction theology, interfaith dialogue, and collective struggles against colonialism, poverty, and gender injustice. The study further discovers that African spirituality and communal values have strengthened ecumenical consciousness and promoted unity in diversity among churches. However, challenges such as denominational competition, ethnic loyalties, syncretism, and leadership rivalry continue to threaten the future of ecumenism in Africa. The study recommends deeper theological dialogue, intentional ecumenical education, stronger interdenominational collaboration, and renewed commitment to justice, peace, and holistic mission in order to sustain the growth and relevance of ecumenism in Africa and the global Church. Keywords: Ecumenism, African Christianity, Contextual theology, Interfaith dialogue, Church unity.	

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Introduction

In his assessment of the contribution of Philip Potter, former WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser observed that Potter's ecumenical vision was deeply

rooted in the concept of God's oikoumene, encompassing not only the Church but the whole of humanity and creation. Raiser explained that, much like the understanding within the mission movement that Missio Dei refers primarily to God's mission



rather than merely the activity of the Church, Potter maintained that “the ecumenical movement is the Triune God’s, not ours.” From this perspective, ecumenism is understood as a divine gift entrusted to the Church and a test of Christian faith, particularly in relation to confidence in God’s redemptive purpose “for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10).¹

It is believed that ecumenical co-operation, tolerance, mutual acceptance and co-operation between churches are more evident in Africa than elsewhere in the world. In Africa, denominational barriers are criss-crossed with amazing ease, especially at the congregational level.² Africa is a continent with people who dedicate themselves with great commitment. Acceptance of the ecumenical movement in Africa is very easy due to the nature of the people and their attitude towards the growth of unity in Africa.

This essay explores the historical background of ecumenism in Africa relating to the African context, indicates and highlights achievements in terms of ecumenism, ecclesiology, Christology, Diakonia, future and challenges, including the contribution of African to global ecumenism.

In addition, ecumenical ecclesiological discussions pondered on the distinctive nature of the church; African contributions have focused on the embeddedness of the church in the African context with its evolving cultures and social context for the growth of the ecumenical movement in Africa.

Within African liberation and reconstruction theologies, ecclesiology has often been framed in sociological terms. More generally, African contributions to ecclesiology have typically responded to several aspects of the African social

context.³

Historical background of Ecumenical Movement in Africa

Africa is one of the most religiously diverse continents in the world, accommodating Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions within its socio-cultural landscape. Despite this diversity, Christianity in Africa has experienced remarkable growth, increasing from less than 10 percent of the continent’s population in the early twentieth century to nearly 500 million adherents in contemporary times. This rapid expansion has contributed significantly to the receptiveness of many African Christians toward the ecumenical movement. Unlike in some other regions of the world where denominational boundaries remain rigid, African societies generally demonstrate a communal spirit and openness that encourage interdenominational cooperation, mutual acceptance, and collective Christian witness.⁴

Africans have approached ecumenism through the lens of their communal worldview, emphasising brotherhood, sisterhood, and the understanding of the Church as one spiritual family united in Christ. This communal orientation has encouraged cooperation among Christian denominations and strengthened the pursuit of visible unity within the body of Christ. Historically, the modern ecumenical movement is commonly traced to the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, although earlier efforts toward Christian cooperation had already emerged prior to that period. The movement developed largely in response to the divisions and rivalries among missionaries and mission agencies operating within the same regions under different denominational affiliations. Such conflicts weakened

Publications, 1997), 246

3. Teddy C. Sakupapa, “Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu

⁴ Gabriel Setiloane, “The Ecumenical Movement in Africa,” in *In the Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, ed. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 246.

¹ Konrad Raiser, “Philip Potter and the Momentum of the Ecumenical Movement,” *The Ecumenical Review* 73, no. 4 (2021): 606–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12640>. Konrad Raiser, “Philip Potter and the Vision of Ecumenism,” in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, referencing Philip Potter’s theological reflections on oikoumene and missio Dei.

² Gabriel Setiloane, “The Ecumenical Movement in Africa,” in *In the Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, ed. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (WCC

the credibility of the Christian message and contradicted the witness of God's love and unity in Christ. While attempts were made at local, national, and regional levels to address these tensions through comity agreements and cooperative arrangements, the growing awareness of the need for a unified global Christian mission eventually led to the convening of the Edinburgh Conference in 1910.⁵

According to James N. Amanze in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa*, efforts toward Christian cooperation and unity in Africa predated the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, thereby presenting Africa as both a precursor and a catalyst for ecumenical initiatives that later gained global recognition. Various missionary conferences and collaborative Christian activities across the continent in the early twentieth century significantly contributed to the development of ecumenical consciousness within African Christianity. Notable among these were missionary gatherings and cooperative movements in Malawi (1900), Congo (1902), South Africa (1904), Kenya (1908), Tanzania (1911), Nigeria (1911), Sierra Leone (1912), and Zambia (1914). These developments demonstrated Africa's growing commitment to Christian unity and laid the foundation for broader continental ecumenical structures.⁶

These earlier initiatives eventually culminated in the establishment of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), inaugurated on April 20, 1963, in Kampala, Uganda, as a continental ecumenical organisation dedicated to fostering Christian unity and cooperation across Africa. The AACC has since grown to include numerous member and associate churches across the continent. Before its formation, an important ecumenical gathering was held in Ibadan, Nigeria, from January 10–19, 1958, where African church leaders met to deliberate on the creation of a continental ecumenical body. This conference, supported by the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and the International Missionary

Council (IMC), became a landmark event in African church history. Reflecting on the significance of the conference, George W. Carpenter observed that “representatives of church bodies in twenty-five African countries attended the conference—a much more widely representative gathering of Africans than had ever before come together for any purpose.”⁷

One of the principal objectives of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is to promote unity in diversity among Christians in Africa while also fostering constructive interfaith relations with adherents of other religions. The organisation has played a significant role in strengthening ecclesiastical cooperation and advancing the ecumenical vision of Christian solidarity both within Africa and in the wider global Christian community. During the formative years of the modern ecumenical movement and prior to the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Africa was largely perceived by Western Christianity as a missionary field lacking a distinct ecclesial identity of its own. Nevertheless, African churches actively participated in the inauguration of the WCC at Amsterdam in 1948. Churches such as the Church of the Province of South Africa, the Anglican Church of Kenya, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Anglican Church of Tanzania were among the 147 founding member churches of the WCC. In subsequent years, African Instituted Churches also became increasingly involved in the ecumenical movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸

Beyond the establishment of the AACC, several continent-wide ecumenical organisations emerged to strengthen Africa's participation in global Christianity and ecumenical engagement. Among these were the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), founded in 1966, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), and the Organisation of

⁵ . James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), 154–56.

⁶ James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), 154–58.

⁷ G. W. Carpenter, *The Church in Changing Africa: Report of the All-Africa Church Conference Held at Ibadan, Nigeria,*

January 10–19, 1958 (London: International Missionary Council, 1958), 5.

⁸ Gabriel Setiloane, “The Ecumenical Movement in Africa,” in *In the Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, ed. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 246–48.

African Independent Churches (OAIC), both established in 1982. These organisations contributed significantly to bringing African ecumenism into international recognition and fostering greater unity between African Christianity and the wider ecumenical movement.⁹

African Ecclesiological perspective towards Ecumenical Movement

In Africa, religion is one of the major pillars of culture; the people of Africa devote their time to worship God especially in their own context. Teddy C. Sakupapa observes that various models of the church have been advocated by African theologians. Most of these recognise the church as a complex reality that defies any simple description. Jesuit ecclesiologist Avery Dulles, who pioneered the use of models in ecclesiology, considers the theological reality of the church as a mystery and therefore identified five dominant models of the church. His models are best understood as hermeneutical tools; windows onto the complex reality of the church. Dulles draws together a variety of biblical and traditional images of the church in developing his models. He further points out the strengths and limitations of each model. The institutional model tends to degenerate into institutionalism¹⁰ while that of mystical communion may deteriorate into spiritualism.¹¹ The model of the church as sacrament, Dulles argues, may grow into symbolism. The model of the church as a herald can so easily give rise to biblical fundamentalism and often focuses too exclusively on witness to the neglect of action.¹² In contrast, the model of the church as servant tends to view the church no more than a non-governmental organisation active in dealing with social concerns.¹³ ¹⁴ All these models have great impacts on the ecumenical movement in Africa. Because the church is always the centre of ecumenism, which can never

be neglected.

African contributions to ecumenism have largely emphasised the rootedness of the Church within the African socio-cultural context, recognising that ecclesial life and theology must engage meaningfully with the continent's evolving cultures and social realities. In this regard, many African churches have discovered common ground through liturgical theology, which has served as a vital instrument for fostering unity in diversity and promoting mutual love within the body of Christ. This contextual and communal approach to Christianity contributed significantly to the emergence and growth of ecumenical movements and groups such as the African Instituted Churches, which sought to express Christian faith through African cultural categories and experiences.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the ecumenical experience in Africa has not been without tension and contradiction. While many church leaders publicly celebrate interdenominational cooperation through joint worship services, fellowship meetings, conferences, and other collaborative activities, deeper challenges often remain unresolved. As Maluleke observes, beneath the outward appearance of fellowship and tolerance there frequently exists an underlying spirit of competition for ecclesiastical influence and space within a continent that continues to experience rapid Christian growth.¹⁶

Africa context on Ecumenical Christology

African Christology is a branch of Christology specific to African nations and their perceptions of the works and person of Christ and Christianity in general. Is more holistic as it integrates the person and the work of Christ, which apply to the whole of African life.

⁹ James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), 154–60.

¹⁰ Avery Dulles 2002:34

¹¹ Avery Dulles 2002:52

¹² Avery Dulles 2002:79

¹³ Avery Dulles 2002:91

¹⁴ Teddy C. Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu,"

Scriptura 117 (2018): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.7833/117-1-1384>.

¹⁵ Teddy C. Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu," *Scriptura* 117 (2018): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.7833/117-1-1384>.

¹⁶ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "The Ecumenical Factor in African Theology and Ecclesiology," *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 1 (2022): 92–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12675>.

Jesus, the Lord of cultures and the Healer, is alive today. He has overcome death so that God's transforming power may heal our deeply wounded souls and our broken communities. African Christians should recognise the healing power of the Lord Jesus, and continually re-affirm the salvation in Christ, forgiveness of sins, transformation of life and incorporation into the holy fellowship of the church. The world needs the credible witness of Christians who live in the world, but are not of the world.

In Banda's,¹⁷ Potgieter and Magezi's¹⁸ views, this question has received relevance because of the perceived foreignness of Christ in African Christianity that stems from the way some early Western missionaries have presented the gospel from a predominantly Western perspective that results in some Africans' view of Christ as unrelated to them. The question further maintains relevance because of the conceptual novelty about the person and place of Christ in African religiosity. That is, Africans are familiar with God; however, Christ is an unfamiliar concept.¹⁹ The newness of Christ in African religiosity was worsened by the emergence of Christ with the early Western missionaries that presented Christ as a Western saviour interested in the world views and problems that arise from the Western world.²⁰ This problem was further intensified by the traditional African world view that requires a blood-related ancestor to meet the African contextual needs of African people.²¹ Given the aforementioned reasons, it is apparent that many African people are not cognisant of how the Christ that the church preaches addresses their existential challenges arises from their traditional African world view(s)^{22 23}

Among the earliest theological concerns addressed by Black and African theologies were questions relating to the understanding of God and Christology. Consequently, some of the foundational

works in African theology focused extensively on African conceptions of God and the relevance of Christ within African religious and cultural contexts. Notable among these contributions were the works of John Mbiti and John V. Taylor. In 1963, Taylor posed the significant theological question: "But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the question that Africans are asking, what would he look like?" This question has continued to shape the discourse of Black and African theologies, particularly in their efforts to articulate a Christology that speaks meaningfully to African existential realities. As a result, various contextual approaches have emerged, including African Christology of inculturation, African liberation Christology, and Christological reflections advanced by African women theologians.²⁴

African Diakonia Ecumenism

The semantic richness of the Greek term *διακονία* (diakonia), commonly translated as service, ministry, or assistance, underscores the Christian responsibility of serving God through the empowerment and support of others in their faith in Christ Jesus. This concept extends beyond spiritual devotion to include active participation in the social and civic life of the community. Within the framework of the polis, the local church and its members are called to function as responsible citizens who address societal concerns and, when necessary, engage governmental structures at both local and national levels. However, many church leaders often withdraw from issues perceived as political, arguing that the Church should avoid political involvement. Such disengagement reflects a failure to embrace the holistic nature of Christian ministry and reconciliation. In this regard, Jan van der Watt observes that "we must realise that we have

¹⁷ Banda's 2005:2-6

¹⁸ Potgieter and Magezi's 2016:1-9

¹⁹ Hood 1990:145; Potgieter & Magezi 2016:3-4

²⁰ Banda 2005:5; Potgieter & Magezi 2016:4-5, cf. Taylor 1963:16

²¹ Bediako 2004:23; Lugira 2009:48-50; Nyamiti 2006:3, 9; Oladosu 2012:160-116

²² Bediako 2004:23; Pobee 1979:81; Potgieter & Magezi 2016:2-5; Reed & Mtukwa 2010:158-161

²³ Raymond Potgieter and Christopher Magezi, "A Critical Assessment of Bediako's Incarnational Christological Model as a Response to the Foreignness of Christ in African Christianity," *In Die Skriflig* 50, no. 1 (2016): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2136>.

²⁴ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "The Ecumenical Factor in African Theology and Ecclesiology," *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 1 (2022): 89-91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12675>.

two definitions of reconciliation here, with two different foci, namely political and religious.”²⁵ This distinction highlights the tension between spiritual reconciliation and socio-political responsibility within contemporary ecclesial practice.

Van der Watt is aware that this narrow definition of reconciliation could be challenged and adds.²⁶ But for the one who believes that the political and religious spheres are both God’s mandates to the world. Many churches, however, saw the defenders as servants of God and the chaplaincy as an important legitimate support; consideration is given to both institutions as God’s instruments for his glory on behalf of the world. People are already “polite”, or citizens; a gospel that does not touch their political context is not the one that Jesus Christ taught, and Peter and Paul and all the other disciples proclaimed. When the Spirit of God is on you and on me as members of the churches, we have the duty of preaching, of proclaiming freedom for the prisoners, healing, releasing the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s grace. Such a gospel does not spare the political sphere. There is no way to be filled with the Holy Spirit, yet simultaneously to watch all kinds of injustice and the suffering of fellow human beings created in God’s image. The Church deals with issues which dehumanise human beings and tend to destroy God’s image. When the Lord Jesus said “I will build my church”, he used the term *ekklesia* in its context of a Greco-Roman political assembly for the welfare of citizens. The mission of diakonia should be holistic, not only spiritual.

Teddy C. Sakupapa emphasised in his journal “Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a view of the church as Ubuntu” that.

“A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming others, does not feel threatened that others are able or good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or

she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated and diminished, when others are tortured and oppressed.”²⁷

African Churches believe in welfare and solidarity of the believers and the community at large. There was a culture of helping each other in different ways and promoting peace within the community, especially people of other religions.

Some of the major expressions of solidarity and social engagement demonstrated by African churches include the commitment to addressing structural injustices that undermine the fullness of life promised in Christ. This has been pursued through educational empowerment, poverty alleviation initiatives, the promotion of economic well-being, and advocacy for ecological sustainability across the African continent. Furthermore, African churches have developed economic justice and poverty eradication programmes that encourage consultation, cooperation, and networking among churches, National Councils of Churches, and other stakeholders working toward the achievement of sustainable development goals. In addition, African churches have contributed significantly to institutional and human capacity development by strengthening administrative structures and enhancing the managerial competence of church leaders and Christian organisations.

African Achievements through the Ecumenical Movement

African Christianity has made significant contributions to the ecumenical movement in several important areas, demonstrating the continent’s commitment to Christian unity, social transformation, and holistic mission.

²⁵ Lutiniko Landu and Miguel Pedro, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Comparative Study of the Role of the Churches in Promoting Reconciliation in South Africa and Angola* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2008), 70.

²⁶ Lutiniko Landu and Miguel Pedro, “*The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Comparative Study of the Role of the*

Churches in Promoting Reconciliation in South Africa and Angola” (Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2008), <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/25011>.

²⁷ Sakupapa, “Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context.”

A. Mission and Evangelism

Mission and evangelism have remained central to the identity and calling of African churches. African Christians increasingly recognise that the mission of the Church can be more effectively advanced when denominations transcend rivalry and cooperate in proclaiming the gospel. Consequently, collaborative approaches to evangelism and missionary activities have strengthened the quest for Christian unity and enhanced the collective witness of the Church in Africa.

B. Religion and Culture

African churches have contributed greatly to the dialogue between Christianity and culture by distinguishing between cultural values and religious practices while appreciating their interconnected roles within society. This engagement has encouraged a contextual expression of Christianity that affirms the dignity of African cultures and promotes the integration of faith with indigenous worldviews and traditions.

C. Dismantling of Colonialism

Churches in Africa played notable roles in supporting nationalist and independence movements that challenged colonial domination during the mid and late twentieth century. Through ecumenical cooperation, many churches provided moral support, advocacy, and social mobilisation that contributed to the liberation of African nations from colonial rule.

D. Gender Justice

African ecumenical movements have also contributed to the promotion of gender justice by confronting sexism and gender-based discrimination embedded in certain cultural traditions and social structures. Through advocacy campaigns, educational programmes, and social interventions, churches have worked collectively to promote the dignity, empowerment, and inclusion of women within both church and society.

E. Theology of Reconstruction

By the 1990s, African theologians introduced a new theological paradigm known as the Theology of Reconstruction, which sought to address the socio-political and economic realities of postcolonial Africa. This theological approach emphasised healing, reconciliation, nation-building, and sustainable development, thereby reshaping African Christianity and influencing theological discourse beyond the continent.

F. Interfaith Dialogue

African churches have actively engaged in interfaith dialogue as part of the ecumenical commitment to peacebuilding and social harmony. In regions affected by religious tensions and conflicts, churches have collaborated with adherents of other faiths to promote reconciliation, peaceful coexistence, and mutual understanding. These initiatives have contributed significantly to unity and stability in many African societies.

The Future and Challenges of Ecumenical Movement in Africa

How can we then refer to the ethical implications of spirituality, which undoubtedly are now part and parcel, not only of the life but also of the survival of African populations, without letting comparison about the shortcomings block us, as if our failure could justify another?

The future and challenges of the ecumenical movement in Africa are based on some questions African churches need to ask themselves, according to André Karamaga in “The Future and Challenges of African Ecumenism”:

Where are We Coming from?

African churches must remember the major reason ecumenism is to promote unity and love in the body of Christ.

“The choice – or rather, the fear – of going to the limit of the enculturation process of the gospel in

Africa for fear of syncretism hides another reality: we forget that the model of Christianity that we internalised is undoubtedly a syncretistic one. Nevertheless, if this enculturation process of the gospel in Africa somehow lost momentum, the journey never ended. The present question is to ask ourselves where we are at this time in our journey towards church unity.”²⁸

Where Are We?

The question about where we are in the enculturation process of the gospel in Africa has to be preceded by two admissions:

“The first one is to recognise that the church became implanted in Africa and it has become an undoubted reality despite its defying complexity.

The second one is to recognise that Africa, which is progressively becoming the main pillar of world Christianity, will certainly put its mark on this, which is in the process of configuration, one way or another. The generations which are going to follow therefore have a huge responsibility, especially our generation which has witnessed radical changes. After these two admissions, allow me to ask the questions I have been asking myself since I started reflecting on the enculturation process of the gospel in Africa:

- I. Have there been in other places and at other times in the history of the church concerns similar to the ones we are having about the enculturation of the gospel in any given context? For example, who were the theologians who accompanied the missionary work of Paul (apart from Paul himself) to implant the gospel in the cultures of the peoples that this apostle evangelised?
- II. Do we have the right to call into question the fact that our respective churches, which are present and active, even in the midst of our tragedies, are not yet really African?

- III. Do our churches really feel the value of the efforts and strategies that we invest in order to implant the gospel message in our cultures? These questions become even more complicated when we realise that the expression ‘enculturation’ has become a synonym for ‘incarnation’. Enculturation is not different from the incarnation of Christ at the centre of our realities. If such is the case, would it be legitimate to pretend to incarnate Christ and his gospel, while the initiative is God’s in his total Sovereignty? We have here fundamental questions that we bring back to the table, but not for aggravating the loss of momentum of the enculturation process, which will determine the future of ecumenism in Africa. It is in the depth of this battle that God and his gospel come to meet us and, just as Jacob did, we would not let him go until he blesses us.”²⁹

Where Are We Heading?

African churches must understand that one of the major goals of the ecumenical movement is to protect the believers and work towards the peace of Africa in order to secure the future of ecumenism in Africa. Then we can now determine how the future of the ecumenical movement will be in Africa.

“We have just positioned ourselves, and we didn’t have the time to position our churches vis-à-vis the battle between life and death for the survival and the dignity of our countries and our continent. Any African entity, and especially any church, which takes the promise of the gospel to give life in abundance to every human being seriously, does not have the right to overlook the seriousness of the battle between life and death that our populations are facing. We can no longer continue managing the contradiction between the ‘life in abundance’ promised by the gospel and the abundance of misery which is killing our people in a continent which has now become the cradle of today’s Christianity.”³⁰

²⁸ André Karamaga, “The Future and Challenges of African Ecumenism,” in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. Phiri Isabel Apawo and Dietrich Werner (Oxford OX2 6HR, UK:

Regnum Books International, 2016).

²⁹ Karamaga.

³⁰ Karamaga.

An understandable pride

The rapid growth in numerical strength of Christianity in Africa has covered their face from the responsibility of the ecumenical movement in Africa, and this pride has caused unnecessary rivalry within African churches. Many focus on membership competition and forget the major objective.

“On the one hand, there is the image of a giant, when one looks at Christianity’s exceptional numerical growth and its dynamism based both on its youth and the intensity of its strikingly vibrant spirituality. This image settles more and more into our subconscious to such an extent that it creates a certain pride and a feeling that we are now part of a spiritual movement which will influence, one way or the other, the future and the fate of Africa and world Christianity. This pride is reinforced and even turns into joy and celebration when members of the Christian family trust us and give any of us major responsibility.”³¹

Justifiable worries

Africa is a continent full of many ethnic groups with different contexts, and many denominations have applied this to their liturgy, which can cause a great detriment to the Ecumenical movement in future. Although many regions and nations are trying their best to tackle this but it seems not to be enough because there is a need for Africa to see it as a continental problem instead of considering it a regional or National problem.

“What is more frightening in the case of Africa is the confusion between ethnic groups and Christian denominations. If, just as we said, this is not specific to Africa, let’s recognise that taking such a challenge with other fragilities linked with history can lead to unpredictable consequences.”³²

Conclusion

African Christianity has made enormous contributions to the ecumenical movement both within the continent and in the wider global Church. Through contextual theology, communal spirituality,

Ubuntu ecclesiology, mission cooperation, interfaith dialogue, and social engagement, African churches have demonstrated that Christian unity can flourish amidst cultural diversity. The establishment of ecumenical bodies such as the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and other continental organisations further reveals Africa’s commitment to Christian cooperation and collective witness.

The study also shows that African churches have contributed significantly to evangelism, liberation from colonial oppression, gender justice, theology of reconstruction, and holistic diakonia. These contributions have strengthened the moral and spiritual influence of the Church in African societies and within global Christianity. Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa has also produced challenges such as denominational rivalry, ethnic fragmentation, unhealthy competition, leadership struggles, and inadequate theological integration of African cultural realities into Christian faith and practice.

The future of ecumenism in Africa therefore depends on the willingness of churches to uphold the biblical vision of unity expressed in John 17:21, while remaining faithful to contextual realities. African churches must move beyond numerical growth and institutional pride toward genuine cooperation, reconciliation, and common witness in service to humanity and the kingdom of God.

Recommendations

1. African churches should strengthen ecumenical theological education in seminaries, universities, and church training institutions in order to promote deeper understanding of Christian unity and cooperation.
2. Church leaders across denominations should encourage regular interdenominational worship, conferences, and community development projects to reduce rivalry and strengthen fellowship among Christians.

³¹ Karamaga.

³² Karamaga.

3. African churches should intentionally address ethnic and cultural divisions that threaten Christian unity by promoting the theology of reconciliation, peacebuilding, and inclusive leadership.
4. Ecumenical organisations in Africa should utilise modern communication technologies and artificial intelligence responsibly to enhance dialogue, theological exchange, evangelism, and collaborative humanitarian efforts across denominations.
5. Churches should continue to engage actively in holistic mission through poverty alleviation, advocacy for justice, gender equity, youth empowerment, and interfaith peace initiatives in order to sustain the relevance of ecumenism in contemporary African society.
6. African theologians should continue developing contextual theological reflections that integrate African cultural values with biblical teachings while guarding against syncretism and doctrinal extremism.
7. Finally, African Christians must continually remember that ecumenism is not merely an institutional agenda but a divine calling toward visible unity, mutual love, and collective witness to Christ in the world.

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