

TOPIC: WESLEYAN INFLUENCE TO THE REVIVAL IN THE PRESENT GROWTH OF THE METHODIST CHURCH IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Since the Methodist Missionaries arrived in the coast of East Africa in the 19th century, the Methodist Churches has been growing but could only be found in three main areas in the country namely: Meru, Nairobi and Coast region. This made the Church named as a Meru church since majority of the members and clergy originated from this region. This paper aims at examining the growth of the Methodist Church in Kenya, the spread of it to other regions and the lasting effects of this growth.

Secondly, this paper aims at examining the growth of the Methodist Church in Kenya as influenced by the Wesleyan Tradition. This could be evidenced by the extent at which the doctrine of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds based on the divine revelation recorded in the Bible. In the last one decade, the church's revival and the return to the practices like bible studies, small groupings called cell groups or wards that might have led to both numerical growth as well as spread of the Methodist church in other regions including Maasai Land, Samburu, Borans, Tanzania, Uganda and Southern Sudan. The paper will aim to show how this has influenced the growth of the Methodist church whilst showing whether the growth is on positive deviation or negative or stagnated growth. Whilst reflecting on the growth in relation to the Wesleyan influence, this paper shall seek to explain the mission outreach employed and if there could be more strategy to trigger growth as well as stating the future of the Wesleyan tradition in Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the Methodist Missionaries arrived in the coast of East Africa in the 19th century, Methodist Church in Kenya, grew in three main areas in the country namely: Meru, Nairobi and Coast region. This made the Church named as a Meru church since majority of the laity and clergy originated from this region. This paper aims at examining the growth of the Methodist Church in Kenya, the spread of it to other regions and the lasting effects of this growth. Secondly, this paper aims at examining the growth of the Methodist Church in Kenya as influenced by the Wesleyan Tradition. This could be evidenced by the extent at which the doctrine of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds based on the divine revelation recorded in the Bible. This discourse and many others to follow aims at engaging the Methodist family with a view to look deep into the future possibly offering directions on the sustainability of the disciplines and traditions of the Wesleyan traditions. The paper will also aim at showing how this has influenced the growth of the Methodist church whilst showing whether the growth is on positive deviation or negative or stagnated growth. Whilst reflecting on the growth in relation to the Wesleyan influence, this paper shall seek to explain the mission outreach employed and if there could be more strategy to trigger growth as well as stating the future of the Wesleyan tradition in Kenya. It is natural that this dialogue between the Methodist Church in Kenya and John Wesley should occur, since Wesley holds a central position in today's MCK. The MCK has explicitly bound itself as a Christian denomination to the doctrinal standards formulated by John Wesley.¹ This is owing to the fact that in MCK theology there is a set of Wesleyan doctrines that are determinative as regards the ways in which the MCK practices, reflects upon, and represents its theology. Since MCK historically understands itself as a Christian denomination with its roots in the tradition of Wesley and the Wesleyan-Methodist movement that he led, I believe it is important that dialogue with Wesley continue.

I find it interesting to reflect on the lines of connection between the MCK and Wesley because MCK so clearly sees its existence as a denomination in relation to John Wesley and the

¹ Deed of Foundation and Deed of Church Order. 1967. p.2

Wesleyan-Methodist movement.² What implications does this have for today's MCK? Is it important only to take Wesley along into the future as a memory from the past, or is there something about his theology that still influences, has the ability to engage, and can shape the denomination in its confrontation with the challenges of the present? These questions, and the acknowledgement of Wesley's position within the MCK, are the primary motivations for this paper and my attempt to reveal the extent to which Wesley's theology forms the basis for the theology of mission in relation to the un-churched/unreached communities. To better understand the importance of Wesley, it is necessary to describe some of the characteristics of the history of the Methodist Church in Kenya. Typically, in many churches, there has been hostility to the role of social or political involvement, understanding that such could be a temptation away from the evangelistic purpose of the Church. The position is based on a dualistic world view that contrasts spiritual and material worlds, believing that Christian experience is limited to the first of these, thereby giving the material world to its own fate. This ignores the fact that God made both in the same creative gestures and with the same fabric of love.

My chief purpose is to evaluate the content of the texts in which the MCK describes the growth of MCK in light of John Wesley's theology and, in particular, in light of the notions of mission outreaches and social holiness as conveyed in a selected number of his sermons and letters. A conclusion will be done based on the reflections carried out during the study and possibly forge a way forward.

FROM A SMALL DENOMINATION TO A WELL SPREAD CHURCH ACROSS EAST AFRICA

In the last one decade, the church's revival and the return to the practices like bible studies, small groupings called cell groups or wards that might have led to both numerical growth as well as spread of the Methodist church in other regions including Maasai Land, Samburu, Borans, Tanzania, Uganda and Southern Sudan. Due to the indigenous traditions, it was very difficult for the church to grow because they had their own faith and it was very hard rather

² Standing orders and Agendas (revised Edition 2015). P. 4

difficult for them to leave their way of worship and follow Christianity. Hence initially the number of indigenous people who converted to Christianity was small but with time the church has grown significantly. New, bigger and better church buildings are being erected extensively. Significant growth has been noted in relation to the number of members, house of worship built, adult and child baptism. This is because MCK has embarked on new mission strategies that are evidenced in the current revival and growth. I agree with Mwombeki who observes that the church in East Africa is growing at an admirable rate because of evangelistic dynamism.³ There has been a paradigm shift in the way evangelism is being conducted in MCK. The Methodist Church in Kenya has not been the exception in seeing pews full. But it is to this group that we center our concern, arguing for the importance of a discipleship which is truly Wesleyan.

In my experience as a Methodist Minister, and my study of John Wesley's writings (though not so elaborate just beginning to), I have become increasingly aware that our ignorance about Wesley has not allowed applicable reflection that would incorporate hopeful opportunities and growth as a holiness denomination. I am not merely speaking of theoretical knowledge, but rather about the incarnational lifestyle as the essence of his message that could help define how we are to think and act as Christ's Church. Looking Wesley's way of life in the days of holy club, a couple of things emanate. For instance, devoting more time in prayer and Bible study which characterized the gatherings of early Methodism. MCK in the recent years has emphasized on going back to our roots. This can only be successful if only we reinvent the way we do bible study. At the moment, MCK is holding prayer conferences and training people more on prayer as a way of returning to the roots. One of the aspects that have come up so sharply is availability of members during these prayer meetings since life style has changed. I tend to think for Charles and the team; it was easy as student in Oxford to meet. In our modern day context, we need to engage in more flexible programs to engage the entire church. More emphasis made on social holiness.

³ J. N. K. Mugambi & M.N Getui, Religions in Eastern Africa Under Globalization, (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2004) p.85.

Looking at Wesley, the father of Methodism, Runyon suggests that Wesley recognized that human beings are “whole people.” His emphasis on both inward and outward holiness indicates this. The holy person is empowered to assume human responsibility at the far end of reflection that requires us to “incarnate” practical biblical holiness in tangible “compassionate” ways, consistent with the message of our Master, Jesus Christ. Runyon, in his book he is constituting John Wesley’s theology by saying that the image of God in human is the unique abilities or capabilities but because of our own interest and the way we see ourselves to be more special than other creatures, the uniqueness of the ability and capability was corrupted.⁴ It was in this case that he elaborates how Gods image was corrupted. This image can only be brought back when people get closer to God in prayer and start seeing things through God’s eye.

THE METHODIST MOVEMENT, *THE DISCIPLINE*, AND THE HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Methodist Church in Kenya was first planted by both the European Missionaries and African converts through sacrifices⁵ targeting one community with an aim of using that community to reach out to others in the country. Since 1968 when Methodist Church in Kenya became autonomous, the church has grown to 44 counties in Kenya with Uganda, Tanzania, Southern Sudan and D. R. Congo under the Kenyan Conference. As the Methodist Church in Kenya celebrates fifty years of autonomy, growth of the church can be said to have happen in the most recent years than any other time.

The growth of the *Discipline* in the years since the 1968 Conference, then, began with these events of vigorous Mission and Evangelism outreaches which are based on Wesleyan way of preaching especially the outdoor preaching. So, it is that the MCK, in shaping its own future, maintained ties to Wesley and even fewer ties to the British Methodist movement, and thereby set itself on a path of considerable freedom vis-à-vis the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. These ties and close observation of Wesleyan traditions has had distinctive and outstanding way of life that has left many admiring and wanting to become Methodists. Kim posits that in early

⁴ Runyon 1998:20

⁵ Z. Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya*, [Nairobi: Uzima Press Ltd, 1982] p. xv.

methodism, the Methodist disciplines were regarded by Wesley as means of Grace which were instrumental aids to Christian formation of life and the fruits of faith⁶. This as could be evidenced in the works of the first missionaries who came to Kenya, their four-fold ministry brought transformation to the lives of those who accepted Christianity. Among the disciplines that were taught in churches then were; importance of education and cleanliness.

Nthamburi asserts that from the very beginning missions established schools for an important role in the process of evangelism⁷. Once an individual accepted Christianity, clear distinction could be noted by the way that individual or family lived. This can only be associated with special grace that was emphasized by John Wesley even in his preaching. For Wesley, Christian life was dependent on the life-long exercise of the means of Grace. This does not mean that all those who were educated became Christians nor does it mean that all those who became Christians were educated. Kim sites in one of Wesley's' sermon that states that Wesley understands grace by the outward sign in words and actions. This became a lifestyle for the Methodist members for a couple of decades. Homes of Methodist members could be distinguished from the others. This though doesn't mean that only those who became Methodists lived well but this lead to many people admiring that life and converting to Christianity. Since Methodist church was in few regions, growth was slow. Coming of Pentecost churches triggered revival in many cities in the country. Methodists were termed as rigid and not open to new way of worship.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

To this point, this paper has been a call to examine ourselves and consider whether or not our current paradigm for ministry is one which will allow us to effectively put "evangelism first". We have suggested that we need to understand the way Jesus' ministry modeled compassion and challenged the preoccupation with purity rules and rituals characteristic of the social and cultural context of His day. So, where do we go from here?

We believe that even a subtle shift in thinking on this issue will have a profound impact on our efforts to put "evangelism first". As we begin to recognize the various ways by which we have

⁶ Kim J. D, *Sanctification in John Calvin and John Wesley*, (Bristol:1996), p.288.

⁷ Nthamburi, p.89

allowed purity traditions to direct our thinking and actions at all levels of our witness and ministry, and as we consciously and intentionally examine these in light of Scripture, may God open our eyes to more clearly see His grace and His love, not only for us, but also for the lost world to which He has sent us.

Let us remember that God has called us to serve - He will do the seeking and saving of souls. We are to show compassion, but He will convict and convert. First factor of growth is that of everyone becoming an evangelist. A case in mind is that of a young Kithinji*⁸ who after conversion in one of MCK mission areas gathered eighteen youths and they started doing a fellowship in his small room. The numbers continued growing and Kithinji called a Methodist minister who welcomed the congregation into the Methodist Family. In asking why they chose MCK they said that it is because MCK is different from others and embraces all irrespective of status or background. This is but a single case representing many others where people from DR Congo and Southern Sudan, have come to ask if they could partner with MCK.

When we speak of compassionate ministries, we think of activities to assist the needy, certainly important, given the crises that many face. But we also need to “conscientize,” or bring to conscience and consciousness, a strategy that attack the causes of these problems. That is the unavoidable Christian commitment to promote social justice and peace. So then, back to Wesley, although Wesley believed in the temporary nature of this present world, it did not lead him to disregard it. He warned repeatedly that the pastor’s responsibility was more than the simple verbal proclamation and individual conversion. To him, it was necessary to promote conditions and societal structures in which “holiness” could proliferate, where the new man born in the conversion-regeneration could grow and give first fruit. Christians are called to redeem their time, showing the significance of their redemption within this life. Social action cannot be separated from evangelism, coming at it, not second-hand from Wesley, but first-hand from the Bible itself.

In Christian circles we talk a lot about compassion - empathizing with others, developing sensitivity to the struggles of those less fortunate than ourselves, ministering to the needy. But

⁸ Not his real Name

God requires more of us than random acts of charity. God calls us to 'love our neighbour as ourselves.' It's a monumental challenge. The human condition has changed little in two thousand years. People today, even members of our families and churches, citizens of our own hometowns - our literal neighbours - are harassed and helpless, wandering sheep. If the spiritual and theological descendants of John Wesley are to meet the challenges of spreading scriptural holiness in an increasingly complex world, then they will need to grasp the core beliefs and values that have always guided their tradition.

If renewal and growth in witness and mission is to occur, then it will come through a reclamation and reinterpretation of such central beliefs as salvation by Grace through faith, the authority of scripture, disciple making within community, vocations of Christian holiness and the church's mission to the world.

CONCLUSION

God's people have been strengthened all the more in their resolve to support the growth of our Church in prayer, giving and going. On this front, we are making great progress strengthening and establishing the Churches we are opening, reviving old missions and discipling members in our local congregations too. The Church is vibrant and moving in the right direction, glory to God. Our Church is experiencing and enjoying great revival. In the past few years we are enjoying a lot of Church Dedications than ever before. We have more lined up for dedication and history has now changed people are competing to complete building their Churches in the shortest time possible. The revival spirit in our Church has birthed great inspiration and Methodist people have taken up big projects to build magnificent Sanctuaries and we believe this trend will change the landscape of our Church in the coming years and more so enhance our worship life.

Wesley is clearly one of the outstanding evangelists and apostles of the Christian faith, notable for his organizing genius in preserving the fruit of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival in his Methodist societies, notable for his publications, including his fascinating *Journal*, and notable too for his early opposition to the slave trade, his interest in modern science, his

commissioning of women to preach, and his concern for the poor. Even though he was not one of the outstanding creative thinkers of the Christian Church therefore, like Augustine or Luther, Wesley has been a very influential one. And no theologian in Christian history has united *theoria* and *praxis* more successfully as a true pastor and 'bishop', crafting his theological writings not for the academy, but for the thousands of converts to whom he gave personal guidance and spiritual direction.

In addition to opening new Churches, MCK need to think of ways to revive, sustain and replenish the existing missions that were not doing so well. There is also need to establish and grow the existing mission and the frontiers from strength to strength and also utilize the acquired sizeable amount of land to house the growth and opportunity envisioned. Sustainability of this growth is something that cannot be avoided at this stage for failure to plan for posterity might plunge this growth demonstrated in this paper into waste.

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