International Journal of Innovative Psychology & Social Development 14 (3):450-456, July-Sept, 2026

© SEAHI PUBLICATIONS, 2026 www.seahipublications.org **ISSN: 2467-8546**

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.22731885

Historical Assessment of the Role of African Independent Churches in Reverse Mission in the Twenty-First Century

Ilami Ozegbe, PhD

Department of Mission Studies and Church History,
Baptist Theological Seminary, Eku, Nigeria
Email: ilamiozegbe@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the role of African Independent Churches (AICs) in reverse mission to Europe. The history of Christianity in Africa has deep roots in Western missionary endeavors. However, in recent times, churches in Europe and North America have been experiencing a decline due to cultural shifts and a loss of spiritual vitality. Today, a paradigm shift in global mission has emerged: Africa, which was once considered a 'mission field,' is now sending missionaries and planting churches across Europe, North America, and Asia. A major force in this global movement is the African Independent Churches, distinguished by their vibrant missional emphasis. Utilizing a historical research methodology, this study examines the emergence and expansion of AICs in the twenty-first century. The findings reveal that AICs are flourishing rapidly, reoccupying the spaces and spiritual vacuums left by declining Western churches. The paper concludes that while this reverse mission enterprise has made significant strides, a large percentage of Western indigenes remains unreached. Therefore, future missional strategies must be tailored to engage Western mindsets and reach diverse socio-religious demographics for greater Kingdom impact.
Keywords: Reverse Mission, Global Mission, African Independent Churches; Mission History.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian landscape in Europe, North America, and Asia is undergoing a profound shift through the emergence and continued proliferation of African Independent Churches (AICs). This dynamic has given further credence to the vital role of African Christianity in shaping twenty-first-century missions, as Africa has transformed into one of the primary missionary-sending continents. This reverse in mission represents a significant contemporary phenomenon and an intriguing subject of inquiry for missiologists, church historians, and religious scholars alike. The enterprise aims to re-Christianize the historic heartlands of Christianity—regions that served as the primary vanguards of global missionary movements from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries (Adogame, 2013). Having originated in Africa, these churches carry their vision beyond their indigenous socio-cultural boundaries, driven by missional narratives centered on the re-evangelization of Europe.

Andrew Walls (2015), the eminent mission historian, was remarkably prophetic regarding the significance of Africa in the future trajectory of global Christianity. Over a decade ago, he observed that the shift in Christianity's center of gravity to the Majority World has been accompanied by the global rise of African Independent Churches, characterized by their explicit emphasis on mission (Kalu, 2008). This reverse mission movement has been propelled by several key factors: (a) the widespread closure and desecration

of historic mission church buildings, (b) the pervasive secularization of the West, and (c) broad concerns surrounding moral decadence. As traditional European churches decline, African indigenous churches are springing up daily, flourishing as they reoccupy the structural and spiritual vacuums left behind. Therefore, this paper investigates the emergence of African Independent Churches—using Nigerian-led churches as a primary case study—and evaluates their ongoing role in reverse mission.

DEFINING REVERSE MISSION

According to Ojo (2007), 'reverse mission' refers to the process whereby churches and Christian workers from the non-Western world—particularly Africa, Asia, and Latin America—send missionaries to re-evangelize Europe and North America. However, Freston (2015) highlights the multifaceted conceptual challenges associated with defining the term. He notes that broad generalizations by some scholars equate reverse mission simply with any movement of missionaries from the Global South to the Global North. Freston argues that a robust definition must recognize that reverse mission operates not merely in a top-down geographical direction, but also as a grass-roots movement 'from below.'

Similarly, Daughrity (2015) observes that oversimplified generalizations of 'reverse mission' focus heavily on geographical inversion while running the risk of ignoring Eastern forms of the faith. Daughrity criticizes the preoccupation of Western scholars with cliché descriptions regarding the shift of Christianity's center of gravity from the Global North to the Global South. He raises several critical questions: Was the center of gravity exclusively located in the North until recently? Does 'the North' strictly denote the North-West? Does it refer specifically to non-Orthodox Western nations? And if scholarship thinks predominantly in terms of a North-South binary, where does Eastern Christianity fit into the paradigm? These critical questions demand thoughtful engagement when analyzing global shifts in Christian demographics.

In alignment with these missiological discussions, Adogame (2013) defines reverse mission as the 'missionary zeal of the formerly missionized continent to reawaken Christianity in the former Christian West,' particularly in Europe and North America. Adogame's definition provides a clear and focused framework by highlighting the intentionality behind the phenomenon. Consequently, this study adopts Adogame's precise conceptualization as its working definition of reverse mission.

EARLY CHRISTIAN MISSION IN NIGERIA

Christianity's initial contact with Nigeria dates back to the sixteenth century. Bowen (1857) notes that Portuguese missionaries were the first to explore the West African coast beginning in the fifteenth century. However, this early Christian presence was not sustained due to several compounding factors, including the political alliance with the Portuguese crown and the small cadre of missionaries whose health and numbers were severely depleted by severe tropical climates and diseases (Beetham, 1969). Furthermore, early Portuguese endeavors focused heavily on commerce. While initial trade involved sylvan products, by the sixteenth century, commercial interests shifted predominantly toward the transatlantic slave trade. This human trade persisted for three centuries until its formal abolition by the British Parliament in 1807.

Following the failure of the initial Portuguese enterprise to establish a lasting Christian presence, a renewed missionary movement emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Initiated by Protestant denominations, this movement was a direct outcome of the Evangelical Revival in Europe (Ayandele, 1960). Consequently, a large wave of new missionary societies arrived on Nigerian shores.

Between 1842 and 1891, several prominent mission agencies established operations in Nigeria. The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society was the first to answer the call; pioneer Methodist minister Thomas Birch Freeman arrived in Badagry on September 23, 1842. The Anglican Mission, sponsored by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), followed shortly thereafter. CMS missionary Henry Townsend, traveling alongside Yoruba recaptives from Freetown, arrived in Badagry in December 1842 before establishing a mission station in Abeokuta in 1844. The Church of Scotland Mission dispatched Hope Masterton Waddell in 1846 to pioneer the United Presbyterian Mission in Old Calabar. Catholic efforts were later revitalized through the Society of African Missions (SMA). Furthermore, Thomas Jefferson

Bowen, pioneering missionary of the Southern Baptist Convention, arrived in Badagry in 1850, subsequently establishing key stations in Ijaye and Ogbomoso—which eventually became the historic center of Baptist work in Nigeria (Ajayi, 1965).

The nineteenth-century reintroduction of Christianity, fueled by European evangelical revivals, led to the firm establishment of the church in Nigeria. This era of European mission produced major social contributions, including the establishment of Western schools, hospitals, healthcare facilities, and social welfare centers. The missionary enterprise was successful to the extent that it raised a dedicated indigenous clergy. However, mainline churches established by Western agencies were frequently characterized by cultural imperialism. As Nihinlola (2010) observes, the curricula of many theological institutions in Nigeria were directly imported from the West without adequate contextualization. African cultural heritage was largely disregarded; indigenous practices were often dismissed as pagan, and converts were encouraged to adopt Western cultural norms as a prerequisite for Christian devotion.

THE EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

The dawn of the twentieth century ushered in a transformative phenomenon in African Christianity. According to Ayegboyin and Ukah (2002), African Independent Churches made concerted efforts to adapt Christianity to the spiritual yearnings of Africans rather than passively accepting the foreign structures imposed by Western missionaries. Historically, churches within this classification have been described using various terms, including Prophetic Movements, Spiritual Churches, Aladura Churches, African Instituted Churches, African Indigenous Churches, and African Initiated Christianity.

A major category of these churches emerged either alongside or out of the mainline historic traditions. Notable examples include the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), established around 1938–1939 following a movement away from the UK-based Apostolic Church; the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), founded in 1925 by Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon; the Church of the Lord (Aladura), founded in 1930 by Josiah Oshitelu; and the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), founded in 1947 by Samuel Bilehou Joseph Oshoffa (Omoyajowo, 1982). This movement is widely known in West Africa as 'Aladura'—a Yoruba term meaning 'Praying People.' Despite their organizational diversity, these churches share a common identity distinguishing them from Western mission churches. They are frequently termed Ijo Emi (Yoruba) or Ishoshirerhi (Urhobo) due to their foundational emphasis on the Holy Spirit (Pneuma) (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1997). Their intense focus on faith healing, divine deliverance, and spiritual warfare has also earned them designation as prophetic and healing ministries.

The growth of AICs in the post-colonial era demonstrated that Christianity expanded far more rapidly in Africa under indigenous leadership than it had during the colonial missionary era. Dynamic prophetic figures emerged from within local Christian communities, endowed with charismatic gifts and evangelistic zeal that accelerated the pace of Christianization. Figures such as Wade Harris in Liberia and Garrick Braide in Nigeria serve as prominent West African examples. In Nigeria, independent churches exploded in growth during the colonial era, creatively appropriating the pneumatic resources of the Gospel while transforming the cultural expression of Christian worship (Kalu, 2008). Over time, leadership schisms and theological developments further broadened this typology.

Significantly, another major movement in Nigerian church history was the emergence of modern Pentecostalism. The puritanical and aggressive evangelistic emphasis of the 1970s campus fellowships evolved into the faith claim and prosperity-oriented ministries of the 1980s. By the 1990s, Nigerian Pentecostalism was characterized by a synthesis of holiness traditions, strategic intercession, and active civic engagement (Kalu, 2008). Scholars continue to debate the historical relationship between traditional AICs and newer Pentecostal movements. Kalu (2008) notes that some historians view AICs as the original Pentecostal movement in Africa. Consequently, two main perspectives exist in African historiography: (a) scholars who emphasize shared worldviews and pneumatic continuity, viewing early AICs as the direct roots of modern African Pentecostalism; and (b) scholars who highlight significant theological and liturgical distinctions between older Aladura traditions and modern Charismatic/Pentecostal churches, noting that many modern Pentecostals distance themselves from traditional AIC practices.

To clarify these complex dynamics, Ayegboyin and Ukah (2002) offer a lucid classification of these movements based on historical growth patterns, theological orientation, liturgical practices, and socio-political engagement. While space constraints preclude a full typology here, it is evident that many contemporary mega-churches share historical roots with the broader AIC phenomenon. Regardless of classification, AICs have become powerful instruments for global Christian expansion.

AN OVERVIEW OF REVERSE MISSION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The twenty-first century represents a pivotal era in the history of Christian mission. To comprehend the dynamic involvement of African Independent Churches in reverse mission, one must first appreciate broader contemporary global mission trends. Padilla (1979) noted that the growth of Christianity in the Majority World following World War II was unprecedented. Decades ago, Barrett (1970) predicted that by the year 2000, the center of gravity of Christianity would shift decisively to the Global South, transforming Christianity into a predominantly non-Western faith. Barrett's projection has been fully validated by the massive growth of African Christianity in the twenty-first century. As Ott and Netland (2006) observe, the twenty-first century has witnessed the most staggering demographic shift in the church in over a millennium. Stephen Neill (1964) accurately anticipated this transformation when he famously remarked that the age of Western missions had ended, giving way to the age of truly global mission.

Walls (2015) observes that this historical shift stems from two parallel developments: the dramatic de-Christianization of the Western world alongside the rapid Christianization of the non-Western world. As a result, the global Christian center has irrevocably shifted. Ecumenical discourse is no longer confined to historical European denominational debates; rather, the primary missiological question today is how African, Asian, Latin American, and Western Christians can coexist as equal partners in global mission. Walls and other scholars emphasize that the defining developments of twenty-first-century Christianity are occurring prominently within Africa, particularly in Nigeria and through the initiatives of AICs (Fatokun, 2013). Indeed, Nigeria is widely recognized as one of the most vibrant centers of contemporary Christianity.

As Christian adherence experiences a decline in Europe, Nigerian churches are actively executing reverse mission initiatives across the Western world. Numerous Nigerian-founded denominations now maintain thriving international branches and administrative headquarters throughout Europe and North America (Olofinjana, 2015). Historically, the Church of the Lord (Aladura), founded by Primate Josiah Oshitelu, was among the earliest African indigenous churches to establish a footprint in Western Europe, planting a branch in the United Kingdom in the late twentieth century (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1997). The Cherubim and Seraphim Church established its UK presence as early as 1965, followed by the Celestial Church of Christ and the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC)—the latter established in London in 1974 under Apostle Ayo Omideyi (Olofinjana, 2015).

A major wave of African church planting in Europe occurred during the 1980s and 1990s through Charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal AICs. As Adedibu (2015) notes, these churches represent some of the fastest-growing Christian congregations in Britain today. The Deeper Life Bible Church, founded by Pastor W. F. Kumuyi, established its first UK branch in 1985 (Olofinjana, 2015). The New Covenant Church, established by Paul Jinadu, similarly expanded rapidly across Great Britain (Fatokun, 2013). The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), founded in 1952 by Rev. Josiah Akindayomi and expanded globally under General Overseer Pastor E. A. Adeboye, entered the UK in the late 1980s. Today, RCCG is recognized as one of the fastest-growing church denominations in the United Kingdom and Europe (Brierley, 2015). Furthermore, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), founded by Dr. Daniel Olukoya, established a presence in London in 1993 and has since grown to over 90 branches across the UK. In addition to these formal church networks, numerous itinerant Nigerian evangelists, teachers, and freelance ministers regularly conduct mission tours across Europe (Ajani, 2015). Regions that were once primary mission senders have now become major mission fields for African churches.

THE IMPACTS OF AICs IN REVERSE MISSION

Reverse mission has introduced a paradigm shift in understanding global mission directions. The active presence of African Independent Churches in the West is reshaping European Christianity and breathing new spiritual vitality into secularized nations. These contributions can be observed across several key dimensions:

1. Model for Spiritual Renewal and Immigrant Integration: AICs provide a vibrant model for spiritual revival while serving as essential centers of social cohesion for African diaspora communities. Missiologically, African Christianity addresses existential and spiritual questions rooted in a holistic worldview (Kalu, 2008). While preserving core African expressive elements in diaspora worship, these churches also assist immigrants in navigating the social and cultural challenges of living in Western societies. Increasingly, they are adapting their approaches to contextualize the Gospel for broader multicultural populations.
2. Intensive Prayer Ministries and Existential Deliverance: AICs are renowned for their intense, structured prayer ministries that address concrete human struggles. Millions of individuals who attend these churches are drawn by a holistic faith that directly engages their spiritual fears, emotional distress, and everyday anxieties. Unlike early missionary approaches that often required converts to renounce indigenous African cultural concepts, AICs take the spiritual realm seriously—offering robust prayer ministries to combat real and perceived spiritual forces, including witchcraft and demonic oppression (Kalu, 2008). Through tailored pastoral care, AICs in the diaspora effectively meet the deep spiritual and psychological needs of diaspora Africans and non-Africans alike.
3. Vibrant Religious Communities in Secular Spaces: Scholars observing diaspora AIC worship services have noted growing multicultural attendance comprising both Black and non-Black members. In secularized environments where traditional Christian practice has waned, AICs have established dynamic, thriving communities (Fatokun, 2013). As Gifford (2004) observes, this movement represents a significant 'paradigm shift.' While traditional European mainline churches continue to decline in attendance, charismatic African churches have experienced unprecedented growth, making non-Western mission agencies pivotal players in European Christian renewal.
4. Practical Word-Centered Teaching and Expressive Worship: AICs place strong emphasis on the authority and practical application of Scripture through detailed Bible studies, teaching seminars, and expository preaching. Seasoned guest speakers and scholars from Africa and the global church are regularly invited to minister. These scripture-focused sessions serve as effective tools for evangelism and discipleship. Attendees engage deeply with practical biblically based teaching embedded within vibrant, spiritually energetic worship services characterized by joyful congregational participation (Fatokun, 2013).
5. Revitalization of Vacuum Spaces and Short-Term Missions: The rapid spread of AICs has helped fill physical and spiritual vacuums created by the closure of historic Western churches. Furthermore, international migration patterns have enabled thousands of African Christians to engage in short-term missions, church planting, and community outreach throughout Europe and North America.

PROSPECTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR AICs IN REVERSE MISSION

While African Independent Churches have made remarkable strides in re-Christianizing Europe, their long-term missional impact will depend on addressing critical strategic and theological areas:

1. Ecumenical Partnership and Mutual Unity: As Padilla (2010) emphasized during historic global mission consultations, the global body of Christ must dismantle outdated distinctions between 'older sending churches' and 'younger receiving churches.' Historic Western churches and Majority World churches must engage as equal partners in global mission. Fostering genuine ecumenical collaboration, mutual respect, and shared mission initiatives between African diaspora churches and native European denominations is essential for long-term impact.
2. Contextual Leadership Training and Theological Accreditation: As Beckford (2013) notes, many diaspora African-led churches have established internal Bible colleges that offer unaccredited training

programs. To maximize effectiveness, theological education within AICs must be rigorous, contextually relevant, and accredited. Training programs should equip ministers not only in confessional theology but also in critical analytical skills, urban ministry strategies, and effective cross-cultural engagement tailored to pluralistic Western societies.

3. Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Language Contextualization: According to Mbanyane (2013), an over-reliance on African vernacular languages and rigid adherence to specific ethnic cultural norms within diaspora churches can hinder cross-cultural outreach. While culturally specific practices provide comfort to first-generation immigrants, they can create barriers for native Westerners and second-generation youth. To achieve greater missional fruitfulness among native populations, AICs must prioritize English-language (and local European language) services, multicultural leadership, and culturally adaptive worship styles.

4. Prioritizing Evangelism and Holistic Discipleship: Despite church growth in certain urban centers, secularism, occultism, eastern philosophies, and moral relativism remain widespread in the West. Reverse mission must move beyond passive immigrant retention to proactive cross-cultural evangelism and deep Christian discipleship—submitting every area of life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, AICs must confront Western technological materialism with a compelling Gospel message of liberation and hope.

5. Strategic Urban and Unreached People Outreach: AICs must continue to focus missional energy on major metropolitan centers where secularism and cultural diversity intersect. Rather than functioning primarily as ethnic social enclaves, reverse mission from the Global South to the Global North must aim at transforming entire communities through holistic ministry, social justice, and cross-cultural evangelism.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the historical emergence and vital role of African Independent Churches in executing reverse mission to Europe, thereby re-Christianizing nations that originally brought the Gospel to Africa. The study demonstrates that AICs have established firm roots in the Western diaspora, effectively bridging cultural gaps and providing deep spiritual and social support to their adherents. In doing so, AICs have revitalized physical and spiritual spaces left vacant by declining historic Western churches, offering a dynamic model for Christian renewal and social cohesion.

However, for reverse mission to achieve its full potential, AICs must intentionally adapt their liturgical expressions, strengthen accredited theological education, foster genuine ecumenical partnerships with native European churches, and prioritize cross-cultural discipleship. By embracing these strategic imperatives, African Independent Churches will continue to play a transformative role in the ongoing narrative of global Christianity.

REFERENCES

Adedibu, B. (2015). Mission from Africa: A call to re-imagine mission in African-led churches in Britain. Journal of African Missiology, 1(1), 1–18.

Adogame, A. (2013). The African Christian diaspora: New currents and emerging trends in world Christianity. Bloomsbury Academic.

Ajani, E. O. (2015). African immigrant Pentecostals ministering to hurting persons in the diaspora: A case study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. In Ministering to a hurting world (Vol. 2). Hirise Celebrity Publishers.

Ajayi, J. F. A. (1965). Christian missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: The making of a new elite. Northwestern University Press.

Ayandele, E. A. (1966). The missionary impact on modern Nigeria, 1842–1914: A political and social analysis. Longman.

Ayegboyin, D., & Ishola, A. S. (1997). African indigenous churches: Historical perspectives. Greater Heights Publications.

Ayegboyin, D., & Ukah, A. (2002). Taxonomy of churches in Nigeria: A historical perspective. Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, 34(1–2), 68–86.

Barrett, D. B. (1970). AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa. International Review of Mission, 59(233), 39–54.

Beckford, R. (2013). Documentary on exorcism. Bloomsbury Academic.

Beetham, T. A. (1967). Christianity and the new Africa. Pall Mall Press.

Bowen, T. J. (1857). Central Africa: Adventures and missionary labors in several countries in the interior of Africa, from 1849 to 1856. Southern Baptist Publication Society.

Brierley, P. (2015). How reverse missionaries built the UK's fastest-growing church. Brierley Consultancy.

Daughrity, D. B. (2015). Correcting serious flaws in world Christianity scholarship. Journal of African Missiology, 1(1), 19–35.

Fatokun, S. A. (2013). The successes and failures of European missionary enterprise in Africa. In S. A. Fatokun (Ed.), Christianity and African society (pp. 103–120). BookWright Publishers.

Freston, P. (2015). Reverse mission: A discourse in search of reality? Scribe Digital.

Gifford, P. (2004). Ghana's new Christianity: Pentecostalism in a globalising African economy. Indiana University Press.

Hiebert, P. G. (2009). The Gospel in human contexts: Anthropological explorations for contemporary missions. Baker Academic.

Idowu, O. M. (2017). The great revival of the 1930s: The origin of modern day Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Divine Artillery Publications.

Kalu, O. (2008). African Pentecostalism: An introduction. Oxford University Press.

Mbanyane, M. (2013). African Pentecostalism and transnationalism in the U.S.A.: The impact of African vernacular languages in reverse mission. Journal of Transnational Religion, 4(2), 185–201.

Neill, S. (1964). A history of Christian missions. Penguin Books.

Nihinlola, E. (2010). Poverty and prospects of Christian mission in Africa: A theological viewpoint. Ogbomoso Journal of Theology, 15(2), 95–110.

Ojo, M. A. (2007). Reverse mission. In J. J. Bonk (Ed.), Encyclopedia of mission and missionaries (pp. 380–382). Routledge.

Olofinjana, I. O. (2015). Reverse in ministry and missions: Africa in the dark continent of Europe—An historical study of African churches in Europe. AuthorHouse.

Omoyajowo, J. A. (1982). Cherubim and Seraphim: The history of an African Independent Church. NOK Publishers.

Ott, C., & Netland, H. A. (Eds.). (2006). Globalizing theology: Belief and practice in an era of world Christianity. Baker Academic.

Padilla, C. R. (1979). The fullness of mission. Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, 3(1), 6–11.

Padilla, C. R. (2010). Mission between the times: Essays on the Kingdom. Langham Monographs.

Ukpong, D. P. (2015). The presence and impact of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Academic Press.

Walls, A. F. (2015). African Christian history: Retrospect and prospect. Journal of African Christian Studies, 3(1), 5–22.