

The Cross in Africa

Outline:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) History of Christianity in Africa
- 3) The African Missionary Force Today

1. Introduction

The Christian Church in Africa is currently experiencing the most exciting period in its entire history. This is evident in unprecedented growth, powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit and an evangelistic- missionary zeal that is set to change the face of the once "Dark Continent" forever.

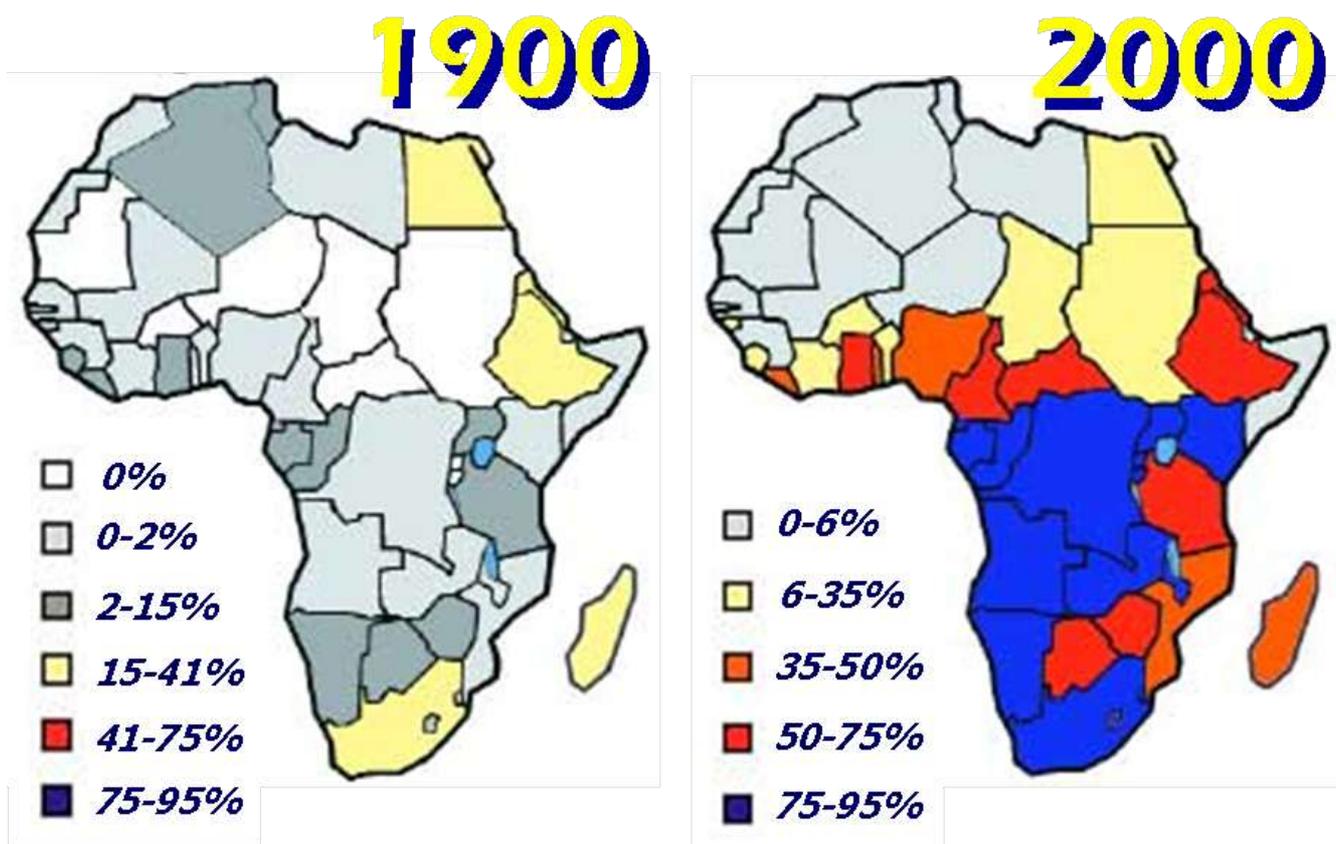
By the year 1900, after nearly 2000 years of missionary work, barely 10% of Africa's population professed Christianity. In less than a century, this situation changed dramatically with at least 51% of Africans regarding themselves as Christians by the end of the 20th century.

Statistics show that during these first years of the 21st century, as many as 25 000 people across Africa turn to Christ EACH DAY! The result is that Protestant Christianity now has an annual growth-rate of about 6%, compared to the continent's average population growth of about 2,2% per year.

Indicators are that the growth and expansion of Christianity in Africa should continue for decades to come, notwithstanding the increase of Islamic fanaticism in Northern Africa. As recently as 1980, at least 20 African countries were "closed" to the Gospel. By 2002, only 9 countries on the continent remained closed.

Estimates show that over the next decade, a staggering 300 million people around the world are expected to turn to Christ. Of these at least 290 million will be from "Third World" (developing) countries of which many are in Africa. However, the critical threat to continued growth of Christianity in Africa remains the shortage of trained leaders for the Church.

To sufficiently address this need for trained leadership, therefore remains the greatest challenge to the Christian Church in Africa.



MAP 3: The growth of Christianity in Africa between 1900 and 2000. The colours indicate the percentage of the population professing Christianity.

Country:	In 1900	In 2000
Congo-Zaire	1,4%	95,4%
Angola	0,6%	94,1%
Swaziland	1,0%	86,9%
Zambia	0,3%	82,4%
Kenia	0,2%	79,3%
Malawi	1,8%	76,8%

ABOVE: Examples of a few countries in Africa that experienced dramatic growth in Christianity over the last decades.

2. History of Christianity in Africa

Summary

The Christian evangelical message reached Africa centuries before it became known in America, Australasia, the Far East and many other parts of the world. However, the Gospel was preached mainly in the northern parts of Africa and large parts of the continent had to wait for more than 1900 years before they heard the Christian message for the first time. Even though it took some time in reaching them, the large numbers of Africans who accepted the Christian religion in the twentieth century - and still today - are considered to be one of the major victories in the history of the Christian Church.

Although missionaries had been actively preaching the Gospel for many centuries, statistics show that by the end of the 1900 only about 10% of the African population had accepted Christianity. In the twentieth century - mostly in the last few decades - this radically changed. Statistics now show that more than 60% of the African population south of the Sahara consider themselves to be Christians. With the dawn of the twenty-first century Christianity is still the fastest growing religion in Africa.

The Gospel to Africa

The first "messenger" of the Gospel in Africa was probably the Ethiopian official who was evangelised and baptized by Phillip on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza (Acts 8:26-40). Although the Bible does not mention it, legend has it that the official returned to his country, where he established the first Christian Church in Africa.

Nubia

It is interesting to note that although many people accept this as the beginning of the modern Ethiopian church, experts claim that the region then known as Ethiopian and the country as we know it today are not the same. According to them, the official actually came from Nubia (situated in the territory known today as Sudan) and it was in this region that he established the first church.

During the sixth century the Church in Nubia experienced a phenomenal growth period after several missionaries were sent to the region. Over time Nubia became a predominantly Christian kingdom. With the expansion of Islam (by 710 AC large part of northern Africa was ruled by Islamic Arabs) clashes between Nubia and the Muslims became more frequent. By 1000 AC Nubia was divided into two kingdoms - a northern (Makurra) and a southern (Alwa) kingdom. In 1275 the capital of Makurra was captured by the Egyptians. The Muslims victimized the Christian populations in almost every African country that they conquered and by the seventeenth century most of the Christians had converted to Islam to such a degree that the Nubian church had disappeared.

It is interesting to note that Sudan, although it was declared an Islamic state in 1983, is still divided in an "Islamic" north (65% of the population) and a "Christian" south (23% of the population).

Egypt

An earlier well-known missionary to Africa was the apostle Mark, who founded the first church in Alexandria, Egypt, in 65 AC. The first members of this church were Jews and Greeks, but as time passed large numbers of Egyptians also converted to Christianity. By 300 AC there were more than 250 congregations in North Africa. The same church broke away from the Eastern Church to form the Coptic Church of Egypt.

Because of the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor, many believers joined smaller communities and settled in the desert. These Christian groups were very committed to their religion and lived in total seclusion. This led to the founding of monasteries that were later also instituted by European churches.

The growth of Christianity in Egypt came to an end and was later reversed when the Islamic Arabs conquered the country in 641 AC. Christians were persecuted and restrictions were placed on their freedom to practise their beliefs (for example, they had to pay special taxes, could not become government officials and were prohibited from erecting church buildings or preaching the gospel in public). The Coptic Church of Egypt is still the largest Christian group in the country. Approximately 11,5% of the total population of 70 million people are members.

Abyssinia

The first missionary who preached the Gospel in Abyssinia (the modern state of Ethiopia) was Frumentius. In the fourth century he travelled to India and had to work as a slave in the administration of King Axiom, the ruler of Abyssinia. During his term as a slave he preached the Gospel of Christ to the Abyssinians and was later set free and allowed to start a church. He started off as the pastor of the church, but later (356 AC) became bishop.

The Church in Ethiopia was different from other churches planted in the early centuries in that it remained relatively strong despite efforts to destroy it. These attempts included conquests by the Muslims, efforts to unify the Coptic Church with the Roman Catholic Church and persecution by the Marxist government between 1974 and 1991). The result is that today 65% of the Ethiopian population are Christian. The Coptic Church of Ethiopia is still the largest group. Approximately 58% of the country's total population of 63 million people belong to the Coptic Church (also see article: "Rastafarianism").

his converts, Philip Quaque, returned with him to further his studies. Quaque became the first African to be ordained as a preacher in the Anglican Church. He was also the first African who was accepted by the SPG and sent out as missionary to work among his own people in West Africa.

The Christian Church and many of its missionaries played an important role in restricting and later abolishing slavery worldwide. In 1787 a group of British Christians founded a settlement for freed slaves - Freetown - on the west coast of Sierra Leone. Missionaries from the Church Mission Society (CMS) and later also of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) achieved great success early in the nineteenth century, not only with the spreading of the Gospel to tribes and groups in these regions, but also in the establishment of schools, a university college and various indigenous Christian churches.

Missionary work in East Africa (1560-1700)

The first missionary to work in East Africa was one Da Silveira who landed on the east coast of modern-day Mozambique in 1560. He continued on foot inland to work among the Monomotapa tribesmen. Muslim traders, who bought gold from the King of the Monomotapa, convinced him that Da Silveira was a clever witchdoctor who wanted to place a curse on him through baptism. Soon afterwards the King ordered Da Silveira killed through strangulation.

Other missionaries followed in Da Silveira's footsteps and in 1652 the King of Monomotapa was baptised as a Christian. Nevertheless, no other major breakthroughs followed and Christianity faded when the missionaries left the area.

Between 1500 and 1700 various Portuguese missionary groups moved northwards on the coast of East Africa, but their efforts to evangelise these regions were not successful. Some success was achieved in Mombassa (modern day Kenya), but by 1700, when the Portuguese stronghold on East Africa started to slip, the Roman Catholic Church's work on the east coast of Africa came to a halt.

(For more information about the missionary movement in Southern Africa read the article: "Christian missions in Africa II: Southern Africa".)

Christian Missions in Southern Africa (1652-1840)

One of the main aims of the founding of the Dutch trading post at the Cape of Good Hope (modern-day Cape Town) in 1652 was to reach the indigenous population living on the southernmost tip of Africa with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In reality, this was very low on the agenda, especially taking into consideration the half-hearted efforts of the then Dutch Reformed Church to convince the indigenous Khoi tribe to convert to Christianity.

The first real effort to evangelise Southern Africa was undertaken by the Moravian Church in 1737, when George Schmidt, a missionary from Germany, arrived at the Cape. A large number of Khoi tribe members converted to Christianity as a result of Schmidt's work. In 1744 he was forced to return to Europe after the leadership of the Dutch Church lodged an official complaint claiming that he was administering the baptism "incorrectly".

Three missionaries from the Moravian Church continued Schmidt's work in 1792. By 1802 a new church was erected at the Genadendal Missionary Station that still exists today. A new building was needed to house the more than 1 000 people who attended the services. The first missionaries from the London Mission Society (LMS) arrived in South Africa in 1799 and divided into two groups. The one group worked east of Graaff-Reinet among the Xhosas, while the other worked north of Cape Town among the San.

Shortly afterwards another missionary organisations sent workers to South Africa. Some of them, like the well-known Robert Moffat from LMS, put their lives on the line to preach the Gospel to tribes and groups in the interior of Africa. Moffat, who was only 21 years old when he arrived in South Africa, was largely responsible for the founding of the Church in Bechuanaland (modern-day Botswana) and later also in Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe).

According to a report published in 1840, 92 missionary stations were already established by that time:

- 32 from the WMMS;
- 26 from LMS;
- thirteen from the local Dutch Reformed Church;
- seven from the Paris Missionary Society;
- six from the Moravian Church;
- five from the Glasgow Missionary Society;
- three from the Berlin Missionary Society.

The African interior (1840-1880)

By 1840 the Christian Church in Africa - south of the Sahara - focused primarily on reaching the tribes living in the coastal regions of East and West Africa as well as parts of Southern Africa. In the following decades missionaries concentrated more on reaching the interior regions.

By the mid-1900s the Christian Church was relatively well established on the West Coast, including Sierra Leone, Gambia, Liberia and the territory known as the Gold Coast (part of modern-day Ghana, Burkina Faso and Benin). During this time, large-scale missionary outreaches were launched from Sierra Leone, which eventually led to the establishment of Christianity in Nigeria and the southern regions of modern-day Niger. From there, the Gospel was taken further into the interior. In almost every instance local missionaries - Africans, like the former slave Samuel Crowther from CMS - played a vital role in the success of the work.

The first missionary work in Gabon was undertaken by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missionaries in 1842. In 1861 the American Presbyterian Church also started working in the area and by 1874 they had established a missionary station approximately 210 km from the coast. In 1845 a group of missionaries from the West Indies Baptist Mission launched their work on the east coast of modern-day Cameroon. After experiencing resistance from the local tribes, they gradually moved inland. By 1877 the Baptist Church had a firm following in Cameroon.

First Protestant missionary station

The first Protestant missionary station in East Africa was established in Mombassa in 1844 by Ludwig Krapf, a German missionary working for CMS. In 1846 another missionary from CMS, Johannes Rebmann, joined Krapf and together they undertook various missionary expeditions into the interior. In 1848 Rebmann became the first European to catch a glimpse of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa. However, tropical diseases and hostile tribes prevented them from achieving any real success.

Krapf and Rebmann paved the way for other CMS missionaries who settled in East Africa in 1876 and who eventually established a missionary station in Buganda (modern-day Uganda). In 1879 LMS established two missionary stations on the east coast of Lake Tanganyika (the western region of modern-day Tanzania), where many tribes and groups were eventually reached with the Gospel.

From the south, the well-known Scottish missionary David Livingstone, who was sent to Africa in 1840 by LMS, launched various missionary expeditions. Livingstone, who later married Robert Moffat's daughter Mary, was at first stationed in Kuruman, but slowly moved north and eventually explored the entire Southern Africa as well as parts of Central Africa (including modern-day Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania). From 1851 until his death in 1873 Livingstone not only explored places never before seen by any other European (for example the Victoria Falls), but he also shared the Christian message with thousands of indigenous tribe members who had never heard the Gospel before.

As a direct result of Livingstone's explorations and pioneering work, the Livingstonia missionary station was established on the western shore of Lake Malawi in 1876. In the same year the Church

of Scotland also established missionary posts along the lake, including the Bandawe missionary station, where many missionaries died of malaria and other tropical diseases shortly after their arrival. Meanwhile, missionary work in Zululand, Lesotho and large parts of South Africa continued and the Christian Church was established with various degrees of success among the local population.

Missionary work during colonialism (1880-1914)

While missionaries were often the first Europeans to explore the unknown regions of Africa and to make contact with tribes living in these areas, they were soon to be followed by other Europeans who were interested in obtaining the wealth of Africa. The race to conquer Africa's wealth reached its peak in the nineteenth century. In 1879 indigenous leaders ruled approximately 90% of the continent. By 1900 this all changed when almost the entire African continent was annexed by Western colonial rulers, including Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal, Spain and Italy.

Although Africans were mistreated and suppressed during the colonial era, the colonial powers also made a positive contribution to these countries through the development of infrastructures - and to a lesser extent the development of human resources. During the colonial era the Christian Church made great strides in establishing churches in regions where up to that time it was deemed impossible.

By 1914 the Church was well established in the following countries:

- Senegal (French Roman Catholics),
- Guinea-Bissau (Portuguese Roman Catholic),
- Ivory Coast (French Roman Catholics in 1878 and Protestant Methodists in 1913),
- Togo (first German Protestants and after 1892 also Roman Catholic),
- The interior of Nigeria (American, British and Scottish Protestants),
- The south of Sudan (European and American Protestants),
- Chad (Protestant and Roman Catholic),
- The Republic of Congo (Protestant and Roman Catholic),

- The Democratic Republic of Congo (French and Belgium Roman Catholic and later also Protestant),
- Tanzania (German Protestant),
- Kenya (Protestant),
- Southern Sudan (Protestant),
- Angola (Roman Catholic and later also Protestant),
- Namibia (German Protestant and later also Roman Catholic),
- Mozambique (Portuguese Roman Catholic and later also Protestant),
- Zimbabwe (Protestant and much later also Roman Catholic),
- Zambia (Protestant) and
- South Africa.

From the Church's perspective this was a very fruitful period when thousands of people converted to Christianity. The people of Africa also benefited in other ways from the expansion of the Christian Church, for instance because the Church played a leading role in the transcription of African languages, teaching people to read and write, establishing hospitals and providing medical care, implementing scientific agricultural methods and introducing new crops. Indigenous people were also trained in various technical skills.

Church and missions in Africa today

Over the last few decades, the Christian Church in Africa enjoyed growth unprecedented in the two-thousand-year-old history of Christianity. Statistics show that by 1900 there were approximately eight million Christians (10% of the entire population) in Africa. Over a period of a hundred years this figure has increased dramatically. By 2002 351 million people (approximately 51% of Africa's population and 60% of the population south of the Sahara) considered themselves to be Christians.



ABOVE: Members of a small village-congregation in Northern Malawi.

The modern Church in Africa comprises 15 000 different denominations and groups, of which 13% are Protestant, 10% Independent, 4% Anglican, 15% Roman Catholic and 6% Orthodox Christians. While the population growth on the continent is on the decline, Christianity is still growing with at a rate of 2,8% per annum. Protestantism is growing fastest (4,2%), with Independent Churches second (3,9%) and the Anglicans third (5,2%).

Despite these efforts, at the dawn of the twenty-first century there are still as many as 1 300 tribes in Africa who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Most of them live in North Africa, where Islam is the dominant religion. More than 17 500 Christian missionaries representing 620 different missionary organisations currently work in Africa in an attempt to preach the Gospel to these hitherto neglected tribes.

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Terms and concepts

Christian Church: Refers to the Universal Church, or all people through the ages and from different cultural, political and socio-economic backgrounds who believe in Jesus Christ and who has been reconciled with God through Christ.

Baptism: Acceptance rite or consecration into the Body of Christ or Christian Church. A sacrament which symbolizes the forgiveness of sin and cleansing of the spirit.

Gospel: The doctrine and message of Christ (the "Good News") or one of the first four books in the

New Testament that contain the teachings, message and history of Christ.

Evangelism: The spreading of the Gospel through preaching the "Good News".

Missionary: Someone who has been sent or seconded to preach the Gospel to people not from his/her own cultural group or nationality.

Mission: Activities of a person/s who has been sent or seconded to preach the Gospel to people not from his/her own cultural group or nationality.

3. The African Christian missionary force

For many decades, Africa has been considered the most important destination for missionaries from Europe and North America. Although more than 17 700 missionaries from all over the world still work on the African continent, this situation is starting to change in that missionaries from Africa are currently involved in reaching the world with the Gospel of Christ.

Although the Ethiopian official mentioned in Acts 8:26-40 is considered to be the first evangelist in Africa (and there were many others after him whose names and work have never been recorded), the first missionary from Africa was sent out in the early 1760s by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (see article: "Christian missionary work in Africa I"). With the growth of Christianity in Africa during the twentieth century, thousands of congregations and individuals have become actively involved in missionary work. By 2001 some 12 500 missionaries from Africa were working in missionary fields worldwide.

Most of the missionaries from Africa - approximately 9 370 - work in their own countries, although 73% work under other cultural groups or tribes. Approximately 3 130 African missionaries work in overseas countries under 395 different missionary organisations.

By 2001 Nigeria was the African country who had sent out the most missionaries (3 350), followed by South Africa (2 550), Uganda (780), Ghana (700), Kenya (690), Ethiopia (610), the Democratic Republic of Congo (420), Liberia (380), Zimbabwe (340), Zambia (320), Tanzania (230), the Ivory Coast (200), Mali (160) and others.

During this time, missionaries from foreign countries were mostly at work in Kenya (2 250), followed by South Africa (1 260), Tanzania (1 250), Ivory Coast (980), Ethiopia (690), the Democratic Republic of Congo (650), Nigeria (630), Zambia (600), Cameroon (580), Uganda (540), Mozambique (520), Senegal (510), Malawi (480), Zimbabwe (480), Mali (420), Ghana (420), Burkina Faso (390), Niger (370), Guinea (360), Chad (280), Namibia (260), Togo (250), Sudan (240), Madagascar (230) and others.