

Missionary ventures of Ghanaian Pentecostals in Europe

An exploration of “Reverse Mission” within the Church of Pentecost in Belgium

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Abstract

In missiology, scholars have often used conceptual models to represent specific trends emerging from Christian missions. However, these models occasionally run the risk of oversimplification. “Reverse mission” is one such model. It concerns a supposition that Southern Christians have come to Europe to “re-Christianise” those who have fallen from the faith they initially brought to them. Through a rigorous qualitative methodology, this article investigates the reverse mission model within the Ghanaian-led Church of Pentecost (CoP) in Belgium, a product of previous European mission work in Ghana. The paper argues that while scholars sometimes easily describe the foreign mission praxis of Southern churches in the North as “reverse mission,” upon closer examination, the intention of “reverse mission” seems absent from the missionary activities of some of these churches. The CoP in Belgium gives credence to this argument as empirical data from congregants indicate that the church is deeply involved in “internal mission” and only marginally active in “reverse mission.”

Keyword Ghanaian Pentecostals; Church of Pentecost (CoP) Belgium; “Internal Mission”; “Reverse Mission”

1. Introduction

Pioneered in 1937 by James McKeown, an Irish missionary from the Apostolic Church in Bradford, U.K, the Church of Pentecost (CoP) has today developed a notable presence both within and outside Ghana (Onyiah, 2004:219–229). The CoP’s current statistical data indicates that as of December 2021, it operates globally in 136 countries with a total of 3,901,400 congregants, a 7.7% increase from the preceding year. There are 3,333,654 congregants in Ghana, accounting for 85.4% of all congregants worldwide, while 567,746 congregants are in branches outside Ghana, accounting for 14.6% of all congregants worldwide (The Church

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of Pentecost, Statistics 2022). The CoP is steadily gaining prominence within the missionary landscape due to its vigorous participation in local and international missions. As rightly asserted by the Ghanaian theologian Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, the CoP in the diaspora merits scholarly interest because it has opened a new axis for missiology (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2011:102).

Among Southern churches and missionaries, the Nigerian scholar, Afe Adogame, says, “‘Reverse mission’ or ‘reverse flow of mission’ is increasingly becoming a buzz phrase... This enterprise, according to them, was aimed at re-Christianizing Europe and North America” (Adogame, 2013:169). By this, Adogame surmises that migrant churches like the CoP in Belgium adopt the reverse mission model in their foreign mission praxis. However, Daniel Walker has argued that it has been almost impossible to incorporate the reverse mission model into the CoP mission strategy in Europe and North America (Walker, 2010:270). Consequently, this article explores whether (or not) the CoP is undertaking a model of “reverse mission” in Belgium. The article’s central question is, Does the CoP’s missionary ventures in Belgium constitute a “reverse mission”?

2. Methodological Approaches

This article emerges from my participatory observation at the CoP in Belgium (Oppong-Konadu, 2021).² Some empirical study findings from that work will help answer the above question.³ As a theoretical underpinning for discussing some outcomes of that study, the article first reviews a few models that pertain to the missionary endeavours of migrant churches, including “reverse mission.” Secondly, it offers a brief history of the CoP in Belgium with its leadership structure and branches. Thirdly, the article presents and analyses interview data from CoP congregants in Belgium in dialogue with academic literature related to the topic before concluding.

² The paper is an adapted version of my thesis, submitted to the ETF Leuven in July 2021. Suffice it to say that I am not a member of the CoP Belgium, but rather the Methodist Church Ghana in Belgium (specifically the Leuven branch). I conducted this research as an outsider through my interaction with CoP Belgium after I sought the consent of congregants. Nevertheless, I am familiar with the Ghanaian diasporic church context (and culture) and African Pentecostalism in general.

³ In my thesis (referenced previously), I purposively sampled 13 individuals, including leaders and pastors between the ages of 20 and 60 years, from CoP assemblies in Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent. The data from the chosen participants were obtained in audio format using a semi-structured interview and analysed thematically. I complied with all ethical procedures in that work, including using pseudonyms (fake names) to conceal participants’ identities while reporting findings. However, a limitation of these pseudonyms is that they may be names of other congregants at the CoP Belgium I did not interview. I only intended to use Christian and European names as pseudonyms. This article captures the perspectives of 10 out of the 13 respondents with their respective pseudonyms. Thus, the empirical data I use in the discussion come from my thesis.

3. Missionary Models of Migrant Churches

The Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans defines a theological model as “a ‘case’ that is useful in simplifying a complex reality, and although such simplification does not fully capture that reality, it does yield true knowledge of it” (Bevans, 2002:31). Missiologists frequently adopt models to describe specific phenomena in the Christian missionary movement. Below are four models employed to examine the widespread presence of Southern Christians and their churches in the Global North.

The first is the “blessed reflex.” This model alludes to the possible benefits of missionary operations of Asian, Latin American, and African churches in the West. As explained by Wilbert Shenk, in the 19th century, missionaries projected that Western churches would profit from a “blessed reflex” in the ensuing years. They envisioned a period when declining mission churches in the Global North become rejuvenated by the soaring churches in the Global South (Shenk, 2001:105). Kenneth Ross has observed that individuals of African and Asian descent are becoming more prevalent in several Church of Scotland congregations in continental Europe. According to Ross, “more than half the elders on the Rotterdam Kirk Session are now Africans, who bring vigorous leadership to the life of the congregation” (Ross, 2003:165). On this basis, he queries, “Is it possible that this surprising new movement of Christian mission may prove to be a spiral of renewal? Could the old ‘mission fields’ of the ‘Third World’ provide the springboard for a fresh evangelization of the West?” (Ross, 2003:165-166). Harvey Kwiyani gives an affirmative answer to this question, maintaining that the present inflow of non-Western, primarily African Christians and missionaries into post-Christian Europe and North America is a “blessed reflex” though, for Kwiyani, it is unclear how they anticipated this unfolding (Kwiyani, 2014:72; 2017:42). However, it is sometimes realistically unfathomable how the so-called “blessed reflex” benefits Westerners other than non-Westerners in the diaspora. One could ask, Are more secular Europeans now turning to Christianity and becoming active church members through the mission efforts of Southern churches in the North? Werner Kahl partly answers this question when he argues that despite the eagerness of Southern churches to contribute towards the expansion of Christianity in Europe, “. . . it seems that Christians from Asia and Africa are not really taken seriously as equal brothers and sisters in the Lord” (Kahl, 2002:333). Following Kahl’s assertion, in our current rapidly globalising world, does such a tendency still exist, and if so, how do Northern churches respond to it? Do Southern Christians persist in fraternisation with those in the North despite cases of alleged unequal treatment?

Aside from the “blessed reflex,” Jan Jongeneel identified three related models used to explain the missionary activities of Christian immigrant congregations in the West, namely, “internal mission,” “reverse mission,” and “common mission”

(Jongeneel, 2003:32). “Internal mission” denotes the evangelisation of Christian immigrants within the specific socio-cultural groups to which they belong. For example, some Ghanaian churches in Europe are composed of Christian immigrants from Ghana who usually share the gospel and their conversion experiences among themselves. In effect, such churches, as Donald McGavran puts it, exist as a “homogenous unit” with mutual linguistic or ethnic features (McGavran, 1980:225). A notable weakness of the internal mission model is that it often restricts these Christian immigrants to their socio-cultural groups, tempting them sometimes to feel complete in and of themselves. As Lamin Sanneh correctly mentions, “. . .to confine particular cultures to societies in which they are found without the possibility of a wider community of sharing is to encourage absolutizing tendencies in those cultures” (Sanneh, 1989:202).

Conversely, immigrant congregations do not always keep their testimonies to themselves or their immediate socio-cultural groups. They firmly believe they have the calling to also share the gospel with secularised Europeans in what has often been termed the “reverse mission.”⁴ More so, many immigrant Christians and missionaries sometimes struggle to evangelise among Europeans efficiently owing to the pervasive lack of cultural awareness they demonstrate in the West (Kahl, 2002:334). Some strive to contextualise their missions to Europeans, with limited effectiveness. Yet, many have insufficient knowledge on how to missionise effectively among Europeans and may require expert coaching (Kwiyani, 2017:45).

Additionally, “common mission” is where immigrant churches collaborate with Western mainstream churches to conduct missions. For instance, in 1998, the “Program for the Cooperation of German and Immigrant Congregations” was launched in response to suggestions by African and Asian member churches of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) (Währisch-Oblau, 2000). One major challenge of this model is that, for example, in the German context, “. . .the former state churches, are still strongly influenced by an understanding that they are *the* church in Germany. They define what a church should look like and how it should work” (Währisch-Oblau, 2001:264). The case is slightly different in Belgium. There seems to be a stable collaboration between immigrant and indigenous churches. For example, in Flanders, as a result of their affiliation with the Federal Synod of Protestant and Evangelical Churches through the *Verbond van Vlaamse Pinkstergemeenten* (VVP, Flemish Pentecostal Union), Pentecostal churches like the CoP have gained official governmental recognition to function as distinct Christian groups while other African Pentecostal churches are yet to join the VVP (Bangura, 2018:506; Creemers,

⁴ This model seems identical to the “blessed reflex.” However, while the “blessed reflex” surfaced in mission discourses in the 19th century, “reverse mission” in its current understanding was only visible in the 20th century. I will expound on the reverse mission model in the subsequent section.

2019:47). Even so, there is still more room for improvement due to the widespread perception that Belgian Pentecostals do not appreciate or comprehend African Pentecostal beliefs and their associated worship activities (Bangura, 2018:516).

4. The Reverse Mission Model

“Reverse mission” originates from missiological discourses in Western Europe around the end of the 20th century (Gerloff, 2001:276-277; Morier-Genoud, 2018:175). This model characterises the coming back to the Global North of some churches birthed out of Northern Christians’ missionary activities in the Global South (Haar, 2008; Catto, 2012). Eric Morier-Genoud has argued that three societal changes led to the emergence of “reverse missions” in the Global North. First, the notion that Western nations were becoming more secular arose, prompting a pursuit of strategies to confront this decline in belief. The second was the large-scale migration of Southern Christians to the North beginning in the 1980s, which saw a significant increase in immigrant churches in the North. The third change happened in the 1980s and 1990s when Christians from the South started building churches and undertaking missions in the North. Churches such as the Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) devised a strategic plan for mission work in areas they perceived as secularised. As a result of such events, in the 1990s and 2000s, Northern theologians began to explore the relevance of Southern Christians in the North (Morier-Genoud, 2018:178-179).

Presently, it is common for Christians from the South to employ emotive language that conveys the idea that a once “Christian” Europe has now devolved into a hopeless and lost continent (Adogame, 2013). As Allan Effa asserts, “They compare the Western world to the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision, stripped of power and vitality by the forces of secularization” (Effa, 2013:215). This inclination may prompt them to engage in a “reverse mission.” According to Adogame, among Christians from the South, “The rationale for reverse mission is often anchored on claims to divine commission to ‘spread the gospel’; the perceived secularization of the West; the abysmal fall in church attendance and dwindling membership; desecralization [Sic] of church buildings; liberalization; and on issues of moral decadence” (Adogame, 2013:169). However, many contemporary Southern churches in the North appear to be made up of only a few European and North American converts. This issue has forced certain scholars to contend that the reverse mission model represents more theoretical than actual assertions, rendering it implausible. For example, Babatunde Adedibu, a Nigerian missiologist, opined that African-led Pentecostals in Britain have primarily focused on their kindred, even though they profess re-evangelising to the British in their mission work (Adedibu, 2015:45). Adedibu is somewhat correct since “immigrants come with a more conservative

theology and practice, insist on using their own languages and cultural expressions, prefer to import their own priests....” (Kalu, 2008:271). Such dynamics reflect efforts to advance the needs of immigrants by fostering a connection with their autochthonous Christianity while residing in Western countries. For this reason, many African churches in the West are much more effective at drawing persons of kin relations than natives of European and North American countries, thus engaging in an “internal mission” to a considerable extent.

5. A Brief Socio-Historical Context of the CoP in Belgium

The CoP in Belgium began through the efforts of a Belgian lady called Gisella Van Brusselt (Nyarko, 2021).⁵ Gisella was previously a Flemish Pentecostal Church (FPC) member in Leuven, Belgium. She had noticed that the Ghanaians who worshipped at the FPC could not follow proceedings in the services because the language used was the local dialect (Flemish-Dutch). According to the report of Nyarko, in 1990, while contemplating how to supply Bibles in the Ghanaian language to Ghanaians at the FPC, Gisella received spiritual instructions through an aural vision. She recalled hearing a voice say, “‘Through You, I will build my Church in Belgium so go to Ghana and bring my church to Belgium.’ ‘I have not been to Ghana before and how can I know the Church?’ She replied. The voice of the Lord instructed her to go. ‘Just go I will lead you.’ Said the Lord” (Nyarko, 2021:1).

Gisella travelled to Ghana in 1991 and met a customs officer at the airport who connected her with Esme Siribour, the National Women Movement leader. She then went to Pastor Johnson Agyeman Baduh, the CoP’s then-Head of the Audio-Visual Department, and later to Prophet M. K. Yeboah, the then-Chairman of the CoP. The Chairman and other international officials accepted the divine message after hearing Gisella recount her experience to them, and they prayed for her. They told Gisella about Kwaku Agyeman, a CoP affiliate living in Belgium. She eventually returned to Belgium with Bible works on Voice Tapes in the Akan language (Nyarko, 2021:1). Gisella later visited the Aroma Fellowship, a Christian community in Brussels, through which she met Kwaku Agyeman and discussed starting the CoP in Belgium. Subsequently, the CoP began in Leuven, attracting Ghanaians at the Aroma Fellowship, who later departed and united with the CoP. In its earlier stages, the CoP moved to Brussels, partly because many of its executives resided there. Gisella hosted church gatherings and services in her house before this relocation. Kwaku Agyeman emerged as the CoP’s first presiding elder in Belgium.

⁵ The CoP in Belgium has no published literature on its history yet. I received a compilation of its history from the current national secretary. As a result, he is the source of all the information in this section.

The CoP initially struggled to thrive and expand in Belgium due to the challenge of acquiring a permanent venue on Sundays and some schisms it experienced along the line (Nyarko, 2021:2-3). Yet, today, it has expanded significantly with three districts: Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent. A district pastor oversees each of them. The church now has 23 local assemblies spread over the three districts, with eight respectively forming the Brussels and Ghent districts, whilst Antwerp has seven (The Church of Pentecost Belgium, Districts, 2022). There is a presiding elder for each local assembly. The presiding elders oversee church operations and services with assistance from other elders, deacons, and deaconesses.

6. Discussion of Empirical Study Findings

Missionary Efforts of CoP Congregants in Belgium

During one of the interviews, Henry, a first-generation Christian immigrant in Belgium and leader in one of the CoP congregations in the Brussels district, said he sometimes conducted street preaching campaigns in Brussels. In describing his encounters, he asserted:

It was very challenging. People didn't want to hear about Jesus when we went to town to preach. Only a few people were willing to listen to or accept a flyer about Jesus. One time we were singing during the evangelism and a lady came to shut us down. She said we should stop talking about Jesus. However, there are times when people were touched and responded to the message of Christ. We spoke to everyone. But I didn't meet a Belgian who accepted the message. Some white people listened to us preach and sing. But I didn't meet a Belgian who accepted Jesus.

Mark, a compatriot of Henry in another CoP assembly in the Brussels district, also averred that "The challenge we sometimes face when we go for evangelism is that people engage in arguments with us. For example, some people tell us that there is no God, and others tell us that they are angry with God because God failed them in one way or the other. Mostly, the Whites [Europeans] say such things."

John, a leader from the Ghent district, who has been living in Belgium for 21 years as a Christian immigrant, disclosed, "Every year the CoP organizes evangelism programs and crusades... And, within that period, we organize the evangelism team and go out to share Bible tracts, and we also sometimes gather in open fields, singing songs...." Similarly, Stephen, another first-generation Christian immigrant in the Brussels district of the CoP, also indicated:

I know that in the CoP, there is a group called the Evangelism Ministry. They hold a program once every year to focus on mission work in Belgium. During this program, members of some assemblies share Bible tracts with people in their homes.

They try to create awareness about the program, which is sometimes held in public places, but they are sometimes unable to hold these programs because the laws in Belgium are very strict on holding programs in public places. For this reason, they mostly resort to sharing Bible notes and tracts with people.

Likewise, Peter, an ordained CoP pastor in Belgium serving in the Antwerp district, mentioned, “In most cases, what we do is quiet evangelism where we stand at a place and hand over Bible tracts quietly to people passing by.”

The above narratives may imply a disposition among CoP congregants to participate in Christian missions in Belgium either solely or with their various churches. The views of the respondents partly support the “blessed reflex” model. Ghanaian immigrants at the CoP yearn to revive Christianity in Belgium, considering what looks like apathy towards Christianity on the part of some Belgian natives. Nevertheless, they are not always successful in this. It is worth asking, What factors in the Belgian context contribute to the noticeable perceived resistance to the gospel? What factors in CoP churches contribute to the same? To respond, I cannot help but agree with Bangura that “The perception of this missions-minded African is that Belgium, like the rest of Western Europe, is irreparably ravaged by the vicious forces of secularization, which has led to a dismal waning of the influence of Christianity on public life” (Bangura, 2018:504). Again, the issue of arguments evident in the narrative of Mark affirms that in post-Catholic secular Belgium, individuals make considerable demands on those who continue to practice Christianity to justify its fundamental principles, which were formerly obvious truths (Bangura, 2018:515).

7. Native Belgian Attendance at CoP Assemblies

When asked about the number of Belgian locals he had spotted in his church, Henry responded, “There was one in my branch, but she left at a point in time.” In contrast, there are four Belgians at the Brussels Central assembly, where Nicholas serves as pastor. Two of them have Ghanaian spouses, while the other two joined at the invitation of Ghanaian associates. Nicholas added, “When I came to this country, I came as a Christian and married a White woman. We were living together, so I was taking her and the family to church...” Rosemond from the Ghent district had observed that in her church, “There used to be...one brother, a Black person married to a White who brings his family to church.” Also, Stephen from the Brussels district pointed out that “... when you visit many CoP churches, it would be difficult to find at least 10 Belgians... In the branch of the CoP I previously served, there were 16 people with other African nationalities, including Zimbabweans and South Africans.”

Rosemond attributed the small number of Belgian indigenes at CoP congregations to the widespread espousal of the Ghanaian culture in the CoP’s mission endeavour in

Belgium. According to her, "...we [Ghanaians] somehow carry our culture with us and our culture plays out in our services because our songs and way of doing things are somehow influenced by our culture, and this makes it difficult for the Belgian natives to fit in." Nicholas concurred with Rosemond's opinion, adjoining that "...our church in Belgium is culture or ethnic-based. To get the Belgians themselves has been a problem in district or church..." Commenting on the specific language adopted for church services, Samson from the Brussels district explained, "Most of the time we use Twi, but sometimes when foreigners join us in the service, we translate it into English so that they can follow the service." Robert, another respondent from the Brussels district, indicated that "...in my church, we use the local language (Twi)..." Gideon from the Ghent district also alluded to the impact of language on the CoP's missionary efforts in Belgium, saying, "...for our church, the language barrier prevents the Belgian natives from coming to church..."

From the various explanations of these respondents, three inferences are perceptible. Firstly, only a few native Belgians participate in CoP meetings in Belgium, with many Ghanaian and African immigrants in attendance. Secondly, the narratives highlight the prevalence of transnational marriage within the CoP community in Belgium, affirming Walker's observation that "...most of the few Europeans who are members of the church are married to Ghanaians. This is the trend in most of the CoP congregations in Europe and the USA" (Walker, 2010:270). Thirdly, there is the portrayal of the importation of the Ghanaian culture to Belgium in the CoP's missionary activities. Given these three inferences, can the CoP mission work be justifiably represented as a reverse mission? According to Walker, just as the early church had the mandate of evangelising to their people in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and other places (cf. Acts 1:8), migrant churches such as the CoP also have the duty of reaching out to its people overseas. Therefore, this scenario may qualify as a "reverse mission" (Walker, 2010:255).

Nevertheless, he also specifies that if the definition of mission stems from the previous Western mission enterprise whereby "mission" was from the "West" to the "Rest," then "migratory mission" or "chaplancy mission" could be used to describe the mission of these migrant churches (Walker, 2010:255). Indeed, I think these models could also apply to the mission work of CoP Belgium, even though "internal mission" captures it more succinctly. The commendable role of Gisella in providing Bibles in the Akan language for Ghanaian immigrants at the FPC, even as a Belgian layperson, is a clear example of such a migratory and chaplancy mission. Be that as it may, by offering a contextually relevant style of worship for diasporic Africans, migrant churches have influenced and keep influencing the religious outlook of the West (Walker, 2010:255). Establishing congregations in several Belgian cities shows the CoP's dedication to this agenda.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

Although the accounts of the respondents reveal attempts of CoP congregants to evangelise to Belgian natives and revive Christianity in Belgium's post-secular society (exemplifying the "reverse mission" and "blessed reflex" models), the mission venture of the CoP in Belgium appears to be marked by homogeneity than heterogeneity since there are fewer Belgian indigenes compared to the many Ghanaians in its assemblies. Conceivably, CoP assemblies have been set up in Belgium specifically to assist CoP affiliates from Ghana in maintaining a kind of spirituality congruent with the brand of Christianity they are familiar with from their home country. Such undertaking may keep Ghanaian Pentecostals far from the dominant secular values in Belgium by creating a sense of identity and belonging. However, to facilitate the CoP's progression from a homogenous to a heterogenous unit, the article recommends that it may be significant if pastors and leaders of CoP assemblies in Belgium consistently evaluate their capacity for contextualising the Christian faith within the Belgian church context to reach out to more indigenes. Additionally, the CoP could deepen its mission networks in Belgium, especially with native church organisations like the Flemish Pentecostal Union (VVP). Increased exposure to the Belgian church culture and practice through such networks would enable the CoP to assimilate aspects into its mission work in Belgium, thus making Belgian natives who join church services blend in easily. That said, the tendency to generalise the whole missionary venture of the CoP Belgium and other African immigrant churches in the West as a "reverse mission" within mission discourses often engenders oversimplifying this model while undermining others like "internal mission." Therefore, despite parallels that may exist between the "reverse mission" and the other models, it is necessary to treat them as distinct as they are. The conflation of these models makes them lose their distinctiveness.⁶

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⁶ Further empirical research on these models within contemporary migrant churches from other contexts is beneficial in examining their relevance.

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