

Black Majority Megachurches in London: aspiring to engender change

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Abstract

A strong aspirational message was observable in the three Black-majority megachurches that formed part of this research project. Although this included a focus on money, often in the form of careers and education, this was not simply a prosperity message. Instead, the churches propounded a more holistic idea of the development of the individual, which can be seen as an attempt to engender positive future change not only in the lives of those churchgoers, but also potentially to impact on the lives of others.

Census data tells us that Christianity is rising amongst British residents born in other countries, including those born in African nations.¹ In the cosmopolitan megacity of London in particular, African-led churches populated by members of the African diaspora (first, second, and third generation) are significant in number. The significance of the growth of African-led churches is reflected in the fact that of the eleven megachurches in the capital that we identified as part of this study, six are Nigerian (or British-Nigerian) led: Kingsway International Christian Centre, Jesus House, New Wine London, Glory House, Winner's Chapel, and Victorious Pentecostal Assembly. Christianity in the U.K. has certainly changed, as Adedibu writes: "The Christian landscape in Britain now has a definitive imprint of African and Caribbean Christianity and is best described using the metaphor of Joseph's 'coat of many colours.'"²

¹ Office for National Statistics, *Full Story: What does the Census tell us about religion in 2011?*, (2013), http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_310454.pdf, accessed: 22 February, 2016. The number of white British identifying as Christian fell by 5.8million between 2001 and 2011, whereas the number of British residents not born in the U.K. identifying as Christian doubled from 843,000 to 1.6 million during the same period. Much of this can be attributed to the rise in migrants from the EU accession countries. However, Christianity also rose among those identifying as African on the census, more than doubling from 330,000 to 691,000.

² Babatunde Adedibu, 'Origin, Mission, Globalisation and the Mission Encounter of Britain's Black Majority Churches', *Studies in World Christianity* 19.1 (2013), pp.94.

As part of this research I spent time with three of these Nigerian- led megachurches in London, all of which have a Black majority congregation: Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), based in Walthamstow and now also in Chatham, Kent, New Wine Church in Woolwich, and Jesus House in Brent Cross. All three were founded in the early 1990s by Nigerian, or British-Nigerian, Pentecostal Pastors, part of the growth of West African-led churches at that period of time. However, these are not carbon copies of each other. KICC is an independent church which was founded in 1992 by Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, and which at one point was commonly understood to be the largest megachurch in Western Europe, with suggested numbers of around 12,000 regular churchgoers. Although the church has identified that it now has closer to 5,500 people who regularly attend, it is still of a significant size. The church has expanded, with branches and ‘chapels’ in around 15 to 16 U.K. locations, and more than 25 international churches.³ New Wine Church in Woolwich, which is also an independent Pentecostal church, was founded by the late Dr Tayo Adeyemi in 1993. It is a smaller megachurch of around 2,000 regular worshippers, although it has more recently started to branch out and ‘birth’ new churches. In comparison to KICC, New Wine can be seen as more embedded within the local community: its location is more accessible than KICC’s Chatham headquarters, and it focuses much of its community work in the local vicinity. In terms of size, Jesus House sits in between KICC and New Wine, with approximately 3,000 people regularly attending services, but unlike the other two churches, it is part of a large Nigerian-based global denomination, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, or RCCG. Based in north London and led by Senior Pastor Agu Irukwu, Jesus House, which was also founded in 1992, is the largest RCCG church in the U.K. and acts as something of the lead church for that denomination in this country. Although based where the M1 meets the North Circular, and not in a residential area, the church does focus its community outreach work in the London Borough of Barnet in which it is located.

Without going into too much detail in this paper, all three churches are involved in social engagement activities that are aimed at members of the public, some to a greater extent than others. Amongst other projects, all three churches operate a Christmas hamper appeal, with Jesus House working with partner churches in the local borough and also operating a form of ‘franchising’ in which they share best practice and roll out their ‘Christmas lunch on Jesus’ project to other churches. KICC offers ‘befriending’ services to local care homes and a homeless hostel in North London, in addition to cooking once a month for the residents of the same hostel. New Wine church operates a weekly ‘Saturday church’ in which local homeless people or those on low incomes are offered a full cooked breakfast (in addition to a short sermon). In the summer months Jesus House runs two other key projects: its football academy for children and young people, in which the vision is as much about keeping the kids from going down the wrong path as it is about soccer skills, and a week of community work in which volunteers do home maintenance and gardening jobs for more disadvantaged residents of the local area. Jesus House also runs a small community centre, partners with the Trussell Trust to

³ The international churches are mainly in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African countries, but also the Republic of Ireland.

operate a foodbank, and collaborates with Christians Against Poverty, as well as a local church, to offer debt counselling and consolidation, and workshops on managing money.

What I would like to start by discussing in this paper, was the observation that there were related key tropes that were frequently heard in both the rhetoric from the pulpit (and the contemporary multi-media channels) and in interviews that we found were more commonly associated with the Black-majority megachurches I studied. These are the notions of aspiration and success, and the centrality of a ‘practical’ church message aimed at helping individuals progress with their aspirations and goals for success. My question here is to understand how these often seemingly individualistic key themes relate to the more communal and altruistic aims of social engagement activities. I suggest that although ostensibly related to the individual, these ideas are part of a broader holistic vision of the development of the self that *can* be seen as containing a concern for others, potentially at odds to the notion that some African Pentecostal churches in the U.K. preach a more self-centred prosperity gospel theology. Furthermore, I also suggest that such aspirational language is also related to a Pentecostal re-framing of time within a post-conversion lens that directly relates to the idea that transformational change for self and others can only come about through this relationship with God.

Church message: practical life tools

I will begin with a quote from a churchgoer at KICC, who I shall call Tabitha.⁴ I asked Tabitha what kept her coming to KICC over the years that she had been attending, and she responding by saying that,

“I think it’s the practicality of the message. It’s not doom and gloom. It’s not ‘thou shan’t shan’t shan’t! It’s not that. It’s about how to: it’s showing you how to live a good Christian life in a modern world. So it’s about...advice on money, it’s advice on marriage...it’s advice on everything...So you’re taught about how to overcome challenges really, and how to thrive. And it’s showing you that it is possible to be a Christian, so you can’t say ‘oh well in Jesus’ day it was different’....The church teaches you and it gives tools, you know, that you need to survive and prosper really.”

The ‘practicality’ of the church message then was indeed one key reason I identified that attracted people to the megachurches I studied and then kept them there.⁵ On the one hand these ‘practical messages’ were often an attempt to relate biblical teachings to contemporary situations, as Tabitha mentions, but on the other hand quite often teachings were light on scripture and indeed, felt more like ‘lifestyle coaching’. For example, a poster found on the walls of the ladies’ bathroom at Jesus House, which highlighted suggested steps towards ‘goal setting’, had no Christian reference and could have been taken from a corporate business training room (see Figure 1).

⁴ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

⁵ Other reasons why people were attracted to their church (and also reasons why they stayed) varied slightly among the churches but broadly speaking included such reasons as an appreciation of vibrant worship, being comfortable in a Black-majority church, the charisma of Senior Pastors, and amongst a number of New Wine churchgoers at least, a desire to be in a church considered to be doing more in terms of social engagement ministries.



Figure 1. Poster displayed in the ladies' toilet at Jesus House in Brent Cross.

To give a few examples of specific 'practical' messages that were recounted to me as being important to the listener or having been adopted by the listener, one respondent, Cathy, explained how she and her husband had followed Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of KICC's encouragement for people to try to have at least three month's family income in savings, in case of redundancy or job loss. Similarly, Ama told me how, following a message she heard in church, she was starting to diversify her income, and seek to have a self-employed small business alongside her paid employment as a nurse. This was explained to me as key to financial security, so she is not reliant on just one source of income. In KICC and Jesus House, churchgoers are encouraged to become home-owners rather than rent. This is not put across in terms of an encouragement to necessarily become property magnates, but rather to be putting earnings into your own assets rather than that of a landlord.⁶

The point here is not to disparage those churches that include such specific 'lifestyle' or practical messages as somehow being less 'Christian'. That is not what is under the microscope here. Instead, it is to elucidate how the Nigerian-led churches I studied are concerned as much about the flourishing self in this world as they are concerned with the soul of that person in what they perceive to be the next world, to the point of giving quite specific practical advice. And this does *not* necessarily mean a focus on wealth or prosperity as an indication of greater success as a Christian.

Instead I suggest then that this focus on 'practical' messages can be seen as part of a bigger picture. Looking back at the quote from Tabitha above, there are key words and phrases here that resonate with the message from all three churches I studied: 'overcoming challenges', and the verbs 'to thrive' and 'to prosper'. Certainly these megachurches do not come from an ascetic Christian tradition in which the

⁶ Jesus House's 'War on Debt' training sessions also focused on paying off debt, owning homes (without mortgage) and "building a solid financial future for themselves and their loved ones". Specifically the course was advertised as not only being practical but based on "Kingdom principles" to "achieve financial independence".

simpler and less materialistic one's life, the more potential there is to draw closer to God and what is believed to be a spiritual realm. And these churches do not shy away from visible displays of wealth: the expensive three-piece suits and the glitzy decorated stages, the high heels and shiny necklaces (although the extent to which members dress up for church does differ, it has to be added), but at the same time this conspicuous consumption and use of buzzwords such as 'prospering' and 'thriving' do not necessarily infer a prosperity gospel message in which wealth is sought as an end-goal and in which being wealthy is seen as the primary indicator of a successful Christian spiritual and moral life, or a prosperity message in which miraculous returns are expected. Prosperity can still be aimed for by churchgoers, but I suggest we need to have a more nuanced understanding. For example, Tabitha explained KICC's message in the following way:

"Financial management is a biblical system, a biblical principle. And so people will think, when they hear that, that it's all prosperity prosperity. And of course there can be manifestations and signs of people's prosperity in the cars they drive and things like that, but then again, the cars they drive doesn't mean that they are prosperous. It doesn't mean anything... The Bible says 'the love of money is the root of all evil'. It's the love of money [that's the problem]. I mean money is important in anything you do! And if we are financially strong... we can have a voice".

Practical tools for thriving: building aspirations and 'being the best you can be'

Instead then, the Nigerian-led churches I studied all exhibited an emphasis on building worshippers' aspirations, and not only in terms of wealth creation. Instead, churchgoers were encouraged to 'be the best you can be', as would be heard frequently in KICC, from the pulpit and also in interviews. In New Wine one could often hear references to a striving towards a 'spirit of excellence'.

Returning to the quote from Tabitha above, she talks about being able to better 'have a voice' when one is 'economically strong'. I didn't pick up on this point earlier, but I included it as it is relevant to this sense of aspiration-building in the Nigerian-led churches I studied. In KICC in particular, their motto of 'being the best you can be' is grounded in an awareness of the challenges that Black people in Britain may face, in terms of education and careers, for example. The church preaches a message that its churchgoers should strive to achieve, and that despite acknowledging those challenges that are present, that people should not use this as 'an excuse' but keep working towards greater progression. Tabitha explains it as follows:

"And don't make the barriers an excuse. And our Pastor's very strict on that. You can't say because you're Black you are going to be unemployed, on the dole; he'll kick their behinds!! [*Laughing.*] He'll say 'get up from your behind! Have a goal, have a vision, start saving. Stop being a consumer'. So there are barriers but then we are challenging our community.... So it's all about overcoming".

KICC was perhaps unique in its specific and vocal call for its churchgoers to rise above institutional inequality, especially racial inequality, and achieve in education and careers despite those barriers. But the words of Tabitha that we just heard exemplify a stoical financial pragmatism and ethic of hard work that I would suggest is common to all three Black-majority churches I studied. But the quote also exemplifies this attempt on behalf of all churches to embolden those that practise their faith under their guidance. Prosperity as a goal, yes, but as part of a wider emphasis on aspiring to be more successful in education and work, and acting on those aspirations.

How does this relate to social engagement?

In some ways the call for greater success in careers and finance were explained to me as in themselves directly related to the ability to ‘bless’ others. Setting up a business, for example, was seen as a stepping stone to becoming a job creator and being able to hire others in the future. Ensuring a good quality education is seen as enabling a more secure and better paid job, which in turn is seen as enabling the individual to be able to assist others who are more in need, including giving to the church to help it with its outreach activities to the community: to bring more to the ‘Kingdom of God’, as it was expressed.

However, this encouragement for churchgoers to ‘be the best they can be’ could also be seen as a holistic vision that reaches beyond education, careers, and finance. The messages from the churches are about striving for ‘excellence’ in all areas of life, including health and relationships. In terms of health, for example, all churches have special one-off workshops on aspects of healthy living and fitness, sometimes aimed at specific age groups such as the elderly. New Wine even has a Zumba class, run by the church!

In terms of relationships, churchgoers are encouraged to consider their relationships with others with an aim to be a ‘better’ spouse, parent, and child. Unsurprisingly, considering the centrality of the institution of marriage to the church, events for those considering marriage or those already married are common, but interviewees would also talk about how their faith made them try to work harder at other familial relationships. For example, Ama at KICC explained how her faith influences her relations with her father:

“As a Christian, it impacts in terms of my relationship with my family. It impacts in terms of my caring role...to my Father, which can be challenging you know, but my faith builds in me patience. And patience doesn’t just come – you have to do something in order to acquire patience. So [in] the situations of difficulty, sometimes I don’t always get it right, sometimes I get it wrong, but through those steps the challenges lead me to serve my father in the capacity that I am in as carer... I pray a lot for my family...I pray a lot for their needs – not just spiritual needs but financial needs, employment needs, for them to be the best they can be.”

Ama had sacrificed a lot to look after her father, but saw this as part of ‘being the best she could be’ as well as striving to help others.

We see then that this sense of striving to improve all facets of one’s life, with the support of God or the Holy Spirit, also incorporates a focus on other people, and not just family or fellow church members. Interviewees spoke about how their faith made them want to be better colleagues – more patient and hard-working, for example. And importantly for our research, they also talked about wanting to be more ‘relevant’ neighbours, trying to connect with people in their community and offering help if they saw a potential need, and that this was part of their faith. Malcolm from New Wine was a keen gardener and talked about how in his garden he grew all sort of fruits: apples, pears, plums and all sorts of berries. He told me how this related to his ability to connect with his neighbours:

“So when these things come out in the season...I take them to my neighbours and give them all around and at Christmas I get them some little package and gifts and everything...I mean it’s just so important. As a believer - a believer that is too much isolated is not really into to the real business of the kingdom because if you are not open, how will it be possible to be able to get to know people and draw them closer?”

We see, therefore, that in addition to wanting to be a better neighbour as part of one’s own development, as part of ‘being the best you can be’, a related reason for wanting to reach out to others, especially those that were strangers in need, was because they wanted that stranger to come into what they phrased as the ‘Kingdom of God’. A key common reason for this was wanting the other person to receive what they felt was the transformational love experienced by being a Christian, and this can be seen to relate to the aspiration and future-building that we have discussed. The time-scape of Pentecostal Christianity is at once looking at the past and the future. Positive experiences that support a born-again Christians’ understanding of their selves as having transformed through spiritual intervention post-conversion are interpreted as evidence of a ‘faithful’ God that *will* also continue to bless their futures, and by extension, others that come into the Kingdom. There is a confidence in this aspirational talk, a feeling that the hard work of the recipient, following Christian ethics of course, combined with this faithful God, will enable the prayed-for future to ‘come to pass’. And it is this latent transformation that churchgoers want to pass on to others.

There were a few outreach ministries then that specifically did not include evangelism, especially those that were working with non-Christian stakeholders, such as KICC’s Breaking Educational Barriers, which worked with the University of Oxford to encourage disadvantaged Black youth in North London to consider elite universities. However, this was an exception and evangelism was at the heart of most social engagement ministries in these megachurches. Indeed, when asking the churches to list the ministries that they would identify as ‘social engagement’ ministries, some could be described as only pastoral or evangelistic. For example, KICC and New Wine both listed their street evangelism departments, and prison ministries, the latter of which primarily consisted of conducting sermons for

inmates. And others, which did include material support also included some form of evangelism woven into the activities of those ministries.

Conclusion

Returning then to the idea of aspirations and the fashioning of Christians selves through practical messages and concepts of ‘success’ and ‘victory’, there are many ways in which these can be considered to be linked to the transformation of society. Churchgoers are encouraged to challenge themselves and ‘go the extra mile’ at work and in their studies, to be a blessing to their workplace and colleagues. Extra streams of income are lauded as financial security and job creation, and indeed the possibility of increased donations towards the spreading of the Gospel. Christian family life is considered to be better for children and parents, impacting on relationships outside of the home. Healthy bodies are essential in maintaining and progressing all of these things, including being a blessing to others: family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, fellow churchgoers, and indeed strangers in need.

But in essence, the positive view towards the future, the building of aspiration, is at once also about reflecting back to what is seen as an intervention on the part of God to transform them, and it is this that also motivates churchgoers to interact with strangers and the wider community. There is a sense that, considering the size of some of the churches I studied, more corporate social engagement work could be possible. Whilst I am not denying this, I hope in this paper to have shown that the tropes of aspiration and success are not just about the growth of an individual’s bank balance. Despite the practical messages, the theology at the heart of these churches can be seen in some ways about developing a holistic Christ-focused individual that attempts to improve all facets of life, for their own benefit but also for others. In framing the post-conversion past through positive transformation narratives there becomes a more determined outlook towards improving the future, and it is this time-scape that also leads some within the church to try to improve the lives of strangers, even if that intervention sometimes consists, in essence, of only evangelism.