

# Historical Factors for the Church's Involvement in Holistic Community Development in East Africa

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## Abstract

Christian education plays a significant role in accelerating holistic development among people. As an agent appointed by God to be His representative and to be “salt and light” in the world (Matt. 5:13), the church, through Christian education, is well positioned to bring needed transformation in a world haunted by much evil: injustice, prejudice and corruption, to name but a few. However, the church cannot effectively administer transformational Christian education without understanding her past, in order to correctly interpret the present and adequately strategize for the future. This paper aims at explaining the role the East African church has played in community development since its inception in mid 1800's to post independent. Although the church has accomplished much, the author argues that the church currently faces many challenges in the task of holistic community transformation, which has historical roots. During the pre-colonial era, missionaries endeavored to establish mission stations. They were engaged in transformation work mostly through Christian education ministries – administered through churches, health, literacy and vocational training programmes. Although many initiatives have resulted to commendable transformative development work by churches and parachurch organizations, much is still to be done to enhance holistic community transformation. Although the approach to community transformation had a common brand among the missionaries, in establishing mission stations and the services offered, their partnership with colonial masters mingled with contextual realities produced divergent results in the region, with significant variations from the originally intended goals. These diversions have resulted to key challenges plaguing present transformational efforts through Christian education. They include: cross-cultural issues leading to mistrust among Africans and foreigners, inter-faith issues causing problems among people of different religions and ethnic issues causing suspicion among people of various tribes. Unless the church salvages the opportunities embedded in the challenges, accelerating holistic development will remain an enigma.

## 1. Introduction

What is holistic community development? In order to understand the phraseology, it is important to define some terminologies. The term community “implies people acting together in some way as a group, and the whole meaning more than the sum of its parts. A community is not just a collection of individuals; those individuals are part of something bigger, which has meaning for them and for others” (Ife 2009, 11). There can be no community without people, and groups of people to be more precise. The other key term needing clarification is development. Development is a term that has different meanings to different people and regions depending on social, economic, political and religious factors. However, a common denominator to all definitions perceives development as positive progress in the welfare of human beings. Unfortunately, many define the term with primarily economic overtones to the detriment of achievement of true development. World Bank emphasizes that development has to do with human development which United Nations measure using “life expectancy, adult literacy, access to all three levels of education, as well as people’s average income, which is a necessary condition of their freedom of choice” (World Bank). The definition implies that development is not focused on just one or a number of aspects of human life, but on the whole person and therefore holistically. Hence this paper views development in a broader a way; it is development that has potential to produce community transformation.

From the foregoing, holistic community development has to do progressive betterment of people groups in all areas of life. Such accomplishment requires various stakeholders in the community to participate. The church is one key player in this task. What has the church in East Africa accomplished in holistic development? What is the church's role in holistic community development and transformation? In what ways can the church accelerate holistic development? To answer these questions, it is necessary to explore the involvement of the church in pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial eras in order to identify gaps and make recommendations for positive

change. The church can be a role model in setting pace for development in the East Africa Region and on the African continent as whole.

### *1.1 The Role of the Church in Development in Pre-Colonial East Africa*

East Africa region was religious long before the coming of the Arabs during the Indian Ocean trade around 600-1450 AD. Traditional ethnic groups had a belief in the existence of a supernatural being, God. Variations, however, existed from tribe to tribe about the nature of that God, where he lived and how he interacted with the human race in day-to-day affairs.

A distinctive feature of traditional education was that there was no separation of the sacred and the secular. God was integrated in every fabric of community life and no activity could be carried out without the recognition of the spiritual world (Awolalu 1976; Mbiti 1969). Sacrifices to the divinities/spirits were given in the form of libations, animal sacrifices and acts of self denial. Such a rich conceptualization of the supernatural arguably provided a springboard through which Christianity would be comprehended and cultivated.

During the pre-colonial era, development of communities was propagated through involvement in manual labor. Cultivation of land and expansion of tribal wealth through agriculture and livestock farming were indicators of family and tribal wealth. Individuals sought to improve their empires through polygamy and siring of many children to provide the needed labor force for posterity. This stance would be interrupted by the coming of trade through the Arabs and the unfortunate slave trade that led to selling of Africans to both the Arab world and to the West. Traditional religious beliefs got influenced as some community members converted to Islam. The abolition of slave trade in 1834, the increase of British explorations of hinterlands and the quest among some westerners to combat Islamization in East Africa fueled the arrival of various Europeans.

### *1.2 The Missionary Era*

The coming of missionaries to East Africa impacted the region significantly as efforts of evangelization alongside westernization of the locals ensued. Each of the three countries was similarly and variably influenced.

#### *1.2.1 Kenya*

The coming of missionaries to Kenya would expose Africans to Christianity. Holistic development programs were primarily instigated through formal schooling. "Patterns of education in fact existed long ago before the first missionaries brought their schools, but the education provided was very different in character and purpose" (Gottneid 1976, 13). The nature of education differed remarkably from that of the west, which was first introduced by missionaries. For example, learning did not happen primarily in school contexts, as is common with western education. This was with the exception of learning disseminated during initiation rites among adolescents as they officially marked their transition from childhood to adulthood. During initiation seasons, the youth camped at a designated place, similar to a school context, where they learned pertinent matters on growing up and the implications of maturing into adulthood within communities.

The coming of the Portuguese in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the Kenyan Coast introduced Christianity. However, the Portuguese were not aggressive in evangelism and in their three centuries of existence. Since the arrival of Vasco Dagama in 1498, their presence did not yield known converts to Christianity (Gottneid 1976). They however subdued the Islamic government and took control of Mombasa and Malindi. In 1844, Ludwig Krapf, a missionary who had been working with the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) in Ethiopia but was denied re-entry, arrived in Mombasa. He intended to reach out to the Galla people (the Oromo tribe in Ethiopia) who would travel for trade purposes. Krapf lost his wife and child barely two months after he arrived in Mombasa but remained determined; he went ahead to learn Swahili. Within two years he had translated the entire New Testament into Swahili. He also set up a school where in the beginning, he taught a few boys for one to one and half hours each day. He was joined by Johann Rebmann, also a CMS missionary, with whom they travelled and discovered Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Kenya. Although traveling to the interior parts of Kenya was dangerous; due to wild animals that inhabited vast land coupled with attacks from locals, their reports to Europe triggered enthusiasm and the eventual arrival of other missionary groups.

Clearly, the coming of missionaries marked an onset of a new type of development. Development meant that Africans would be exposed to the western culture through the three R's: reading, writing and arithmetic. Formal schooling therefore became a main part of the development agenda at the inception of the African church.

### 1.2.2 Tanzania

Krapf and his later counterpart, Rebmann, had their mission base in Mombasa, Kenya. They visited Tanzania in 1848 to meet with some local leaders at Vuga (Gottfried 1976, 14). They found some literate locals who could read and write in Arabic, implying the involvement of Muslims in education. However, Islamic education was primarily for the purpose of proselytizing the local folk and for enhancing trade. Krapf opened the first school in East Africa. From the onset, schools were primarily to facilitate mission work in converting the “pagan” world of Africans.

A formal school was started in Tanzania by German missionaries in the 1800s but was not centrally organized. When the British military overthrew Germany, they took over the administration focal point of the government in Tanzania (then called Tanganyika) which became their official territory by 1922. By the year 1903, the missionaries had built 15 schools while government had built only 8. And by the year 1911, the government had 83 schools and the missionaries 918 schools. The missionaries therefore progressively educated a majority number of natives compared to the government. Through education, the development agenda was enhanced.

### 1.2.3 Uganda

Before the coming of missionaries to the region, Uganda had a traditional form of education which was primarily transmitted through observation in natural settings. Like other countries in the East Africa region, lessons were mastered through songs and dances, poetry and proverbs. However, unique to the region was the organization of some Ugandan communities into kingdoms, the most prominent being the Buganda kingdom. At the “palace” there were page boys who were specially trained to serve the kingdom in various capacities (Omatseye and Others, 2008).

Unlike Kenya and Tanzania, Uganda received the first missionaries in 1877; over three decades after Kenya and Tanzania. Sir Henry Morton Stanley visited Mutesa Kabaka, king of the Baganda kingdom, who at the time was disillusioned about Islam due to the attempt by Egypt to Islamize Uganda and to control Lake Victoria. Stanley wrote a letter to appeal to the Christian Missionary Society for volunteer missionaries with technical skills to do vocational work in Uganda. The letter generated much enthusiasm among the Christian Missionary Society fraternity. Many volunteers arrived in Uganda in 1886 both from Protestant and Catholic mission agencies. At that time Mutesa was skeptical about the ability of Christian education to transform the nation since missionaries up to that time focused on the teaching of the 3R's.

The arrival of young missionaries like the Scottish Alexander Mackay with a background in engineering revived Mutesa's zeal when he observed skills transmitted to Ugandans such as the construction of bridges, the repair of his guns and carpentry work among others (Kasozi et al. 1994). However, after Kabaka's death, Mwanga, his son, took over leadership at the age of 18. The young king was skeptical of the missionaries who disapproved his homosexual practices. He soon killed some popular Christians in a bid to consolidate his power and to banish CMS missionaries from the country. At the time he favored the Catholic missionaries to the envy of the Protestant missions (Kasozi et al. 1994). Competition ensued between the different religious groups including the Muslims who had lost the favor of Mutesa. Mwanga finally lost power to Muslims who were eager to turn Uganda to an Islamic state. As a result, Christian missionaries lost the battle for a couple of years. The arrival of Sir Frederick Lugard of the Imperial British East Africa Company changed the situation because he found the Islamic government resistant to British imperialism, the Catholics resistant to British (seen as Protestant), while the Protestant missionaries were willing to work with him. Taking advantage of the situation, he appealed to Britain for help which eventually led to the defeat of the Islamic government after a war and an imminent declaration of Uganda as a Protectorate of the British Empire.

Hence, the Anglican church of Uganda, which was the main Protestant church at the time enjoyed support from the government and worked hand in hand for the work of development.

### 1.3 The Colonial Period

Things took a different turn for the spread of Christian education when Uganda became a Protectorate of Uganda in 1894. The British government decided to build a railway line from Mombasa to the landlocked country of Uganda. The resistance of Kenyan residents to forced labor compelled the British to import laborers from India. It is important to note that the nature of forced labor by the colonial masters, which also led to the death of many laborers, may have resulted to negative attitudes towards infrastructural development. Nonetheless, the

construction of the railway line opened up interior Kenya to the rest of the world. Groups of missionaries set up their mission stations in various parts of the country. The construction of these missions was done with the help of local communities. Missionaries were known to work with ethnic groups, learned their language and culture, and were able to attract a following. Gradually some become converts to Christianity. The Christian Missionary Society established a mission station in Taveta and then later in Kikuyu land; African Inland Mission settled in Kijabe; Friends Africa Industrial Mission in western Kenya; the Methodists in Meru and Holy Ghost Fathers of the Catholic church settled in Kiambu. Kenya was thereby said to be a host for mission work (Gottfried 1976). Various missions applied various methods of engaging communities. However, the lack of unified policies in holistic development meant some missions concentrated on some aspects of development to the detriment of others. Those missions that received more funding from their sending agencies were also at a more advantageous stance than their counterparts.

Throughout the region, missionaries established mission stations for the purpose of providing safe environments for learning in addition to offering other services needed by communities. These services included health, water and security for themselves and for their adherents, who were ostracized by their communities for embracing Western values and education. The quality of education in schools depended on the denomination of the missionary sending agencies. This was not equitable in various regions even at independence.

The colonial government was expanding rapidly in the 1920's and was in need of personnel. However, they criticized the quality of education offered by missionary schools as lacking the ability to produce professionals, and only producing unskilled converts (Gottfried 1976). The government began to establish secular schools and to create policy to force mission schools to offer secular education to their students. They also employed some of people educated in the Islamic school (Gottfried 1976; Moshi). Gradually, a partnership between missionaries and the government led to significant improvement of education but missionaries still sponsored most of the education enterprises. Limited financial resources usually compromised the quality of education, particularly in the "out-schools" and later independent schools outside the mission stations. Those schools were run by African converts with limited training and supervision by the already shorthanded missionary authorities. Financial dependency of the missionary schools on the government gradually diluted the mission's ability to enforce their religious inclinations on education although missionary alliances were successful in convincing the government to allow religious instruction to be an integral part of the education offered to citizens (Gottfried 1976).

### *1.2 Development and the Church in East Africa after Independence*

The East African Church has made remarkable progress in holistic development agenda during the post independence era. Three examples will be given in the next section including: education and political engagement, the growth of indigenous churches and parachurch organizations, and inter-faith initiatives.

### *1.3 Education and Political Engagement – The Case of Uganda*

As indicated in the previous section, Uganda's post dependence era was characterized with unprecedented political instability and was equally paralleled by religious schisms. As each Christian group struggled to have preeminence in the affairs of the country, education continued to be their major contribution. Schools became the means through which development was propagated. Although the colonial government has sought more control of education for the east Africa region in the 1920's, and had introduced a secular curriculum, the teaching of religious education was allowed by the government (Gottfried 1976; Ward; Balyage 1998). To date, Ugandan church remains a leader in education in the context of primary, secondary and tertiary education (Stambach 2010). For example, among 30 universities registered and/or accredited by the government in 2010, 9 universities were founded and run by churches (7 protestant and 2 Catholic) (Muwagga 2011).

The Uganda church was influenced by the East Africa Revival which is believed to have originated in Rwanda due to its impact there, but which Ward (2002) argues originated in Baganda (Uganda) in the 1930's. The revival sparked a big challenge to the conservative/traditionalist church leadership but gradually became integrated into the main stream church. Although the revival movement emphasized more on the spirituality of adherents and was criticized for minimal involvement in the social-political life of the nation, adherents became tightly knit together as followers of Christ regardless of their socio-economic background. The African leadership of the Church of Uganda became strengthened as they challenged sin in the congregation including racism among the CMS missionaries (Gottfried 1976). They preached reconciliation through Christ, a feature that was remarkably notable wherever the revival spread. By the late 1940's the movement was spreading globally. The revival would soon be imported to Kenya through some of the adherents "*Barokore*". The work of Bishop Festo Kivengere, a

Bishop and international evangelist is worth mentioning. The Bishop founded African Evangelistic Enterprise in Uganda, a missions' agency that has been involved in evangelism in addition to addressing societal issues such as the plight of refugees; orphan care; conflict management and reconciliation; and leadership training among other ministries.

Notably, Christian churches labored to educate their followers as they sought ways to remain relevant with regard to political affairs of the nation. The overthrow of the government and the self declaration of Idi Amin as the president of Uganda marked a difficult period (1971-1979) for the church, particularly the protestant church. Many Christian leaders were killed and persecuted, missionaries banished, British companies localized, Asians ousted from Uganda and civilians punished and threatened (Kasozi et al.). This period marked a low point in development of the nation, and the suffering church and Ugandan citizens. But the church was strengthened even in the diaspora where many advocated for freedom in Uganda. As earlier mentioned the church eventually emerged strong and established itself as partner with government in the task of rebuilding the nation.

#### *1.4 The Growth of Indigenous Churches and Parachurch Organizations – The Case of Kenya*

As noted earlier, multiplication of independent churches which emanated from discontented locals who were originally affiliated to mission stations was further fueled by the East Africa Revival that began in Rwanda and Uganda in 1930's. While the Church of Uganda seem to have succeeded in integrating members of the Revival fellowship within the mainline churches, in Kenya the revival increased the number of Christian converts but also led to splits and initiation of many indigenous/independent churches. Church management issues demanded the need for unity among different missions and a meeting to discuss the same was held in Kijabe. However, from the 1920's to the 50's procrastination became dominant due to disagreement on the most fundamental tenets of the Christian faith.

The quest nevertheless gave rise to Kenya Council of Churches which is now known as the National Council of Churches in Kenya; a body that facilitates Christian education of churches through advocacy. The Christian Churches Education Council was also birthed later. The NCCCK has been instrument in ensuring the propagation of community development through advocacy, community development projections including the enhancement of education and the teaching of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in public schools. This has been helpful especially as pressure increases, from international bodies, to stop the teaching of CRE.

At independence missions organizations had already started the discussion of handing over to national leaders but most were slow to relinquish autonomy. One of the major handicaps was that the missionaries and subsequently the colonial government had never embarked in developing leadership skills among the nationals. They were instead offered third class level of education and were viewed to be inferior, in essence and substance, to the Europeans and even to the Indians who had settled in the region after the construction of the railway line. The establishment of St. Paul's United Theological Seminary to train pastors helped to begin addressing the leadership gap in the church that was created by the transition.

Association of Evangelicals of African was started in 1966 after an international inter-denomination meeting involving missionaries met in Limuru, Kenya to discuss unity in the church. In the 80's, the Association founded two theological institutions one in Bangui, Central Republic of Africa and another in Nairobi, Kenya. Both institutions engaged in training pastors at graduate level which no other institution offered at the time. The Association also founded the Christian Learning Material Center, a ministry involved in the publication of Christian Education curriculum materials for churches. Although based in Nairobi, CLMC materials have been used by churches both in East Africa and beyond. Following the contribution of CLMC and due to the rising demands for curriculum development, other organizations such as Fellowship for Christian Unions (Focus) and Kenya Students Christian Fellowship (KSCF), and many local churches have began development more resources to address various needs.

Such accomplishments are worth celebrating but of importance is note that individual accomplishments of institutions do not make for holistic community development. In many instances, churches and parachurch organizations have worked in competition with one another and the idea of community has been lost on the altar of institutional interests.



### *1.5 Interfaith Initiatives – The Case of Tanzania*

Tanzania continues to exhibit a strong and stable political climate that has enabled the growth of holistic development endeavors. Unique to the region, government policy allows freedom of worship and encourages religious tolerance in theory and practice. As a result, the Christian population has grown from 25% in 1925 to about 50% in 2012 estimates (CIA World Factbook). The church continues to play a role in educating Christians through local congregations, and church initiated schools at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Unlike her counterparts in the East Africa region, Tanzania school curriculum does not officially include religious instruction but allows institutions to choose such instruction after securing consent from the school governing authorities. Some churches like Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania have been on the forefront of Christian education leadership in the country. Efforts to continue in Christian education have also been garnered from Kenya through parachurch movements. For example, the Christian Learning Materials Center established by the Association of Evangelicals of Africa has been providing Christian education resources for children and youth in Tanzania. The work of SIL cannot be underestimated as the organization has continued to translate the Bible into local dialects, providing the primary tool for effective for literacy and Christian education endeavors. The organization has been instrumental in organizing interdenominational meetings where church leaders participate in planning, developing and implementing scripture use in the local dialects, and addressing other community concerns for holistic development.

Tanzania's holistic development programs usually include interfaith activities where religious tolerance is encouraged and peaceful coexistence enhanced. Since the country experiences episodic instances of religious violence, primarily between Moslems and Christians, interfaith programs are more common in Tanzania than in Kenya and Uganda.

## **2. Key Challenges and Opportunities in the Holistic Development of East Africa: Cross-Cultural, Interfaith and Ethnic Issues**

Cross-cultural, interfaith and ethnic conflicts are rampant within the East Africa region. These conflicts also present the greatest opportunities for accelerated community development. Identifying their historical roots is an important part of that process but the church must go beyond investigation into bridging gaps and offering strategic interventions. “. . . It is to be noted that when the European came s/he assumed that the African had nothing in matters of religion and culture and education. If anything it was very primitive. This made it difficult for the enculturation of the Kenyan. They uprooted them from their value systems, culture and roots” (Njenga 2010, 26). The stance of the missionaries produced counter reactions among the natives. In western Kenya many sects emanated from churches creating numerous Independent churches. In central Kenya, the Kikuyu community defended their cultural practice of girl “circumcision”, rightly called clitoridectomy (Karanja 1999). The controversy caused a schism where the Kikuyu Independent Association was formed which birthed African Independent Schools and later the African Independent church of East Africa was formed. The rise of independent churches became both a blessing and a challenge for holistic development. A blessing because many locals were able to understand and follow the gospel now delivered in a clear language of their fellow African leaders and the Christian church significantly grew numerically. The phenomena, however, poses major challenges due to lack of theological training among its leaders and consequent syncretism among adherents. Although Njenga (2010) opines that the adherents rejected missionary culture and their own culture to embrace the Jewish Old Testament culture, I argue that the converts embraced a little of everything aforementioned, including some elements of the Greek and Roman cultures in the New Testament. To date, most of these churches lack trained Christian educators to disciple the followers. For them, Christianity is among other things, the observation of dress code (usually turbans and other costumes), food laws, holy days, songs and dances, and fervent dramatic prayers. However, manifestations of the spirit that are highly regarded by most of these churches result to apparent indecent physical activities like falling, foaming, vomiting and comical exorcism of evil spirits. Christian ideology is mingled with superstition in a complex way. Community development among such people has been slowed by cultural limitations and superstition that perceives development as imported evil by the colonial masters.

The growth of the Pentecostal movement in the whole East Africa region is worth mentioning. Similar to Kenya, Pentecostal revival of the 70s has influenced the church in Uganda and Tanzania. Pentecostal movements are marked with a strong evangelical message, the endowment of a second blessing (baptism of the Holy Spirit) characterized by speaking in tongues and an emphasis on exercising spiritual gifts. Lausanne convention acknowledges that Pentecostalism has taken root in Africa “even more so in Africa where religion is a survival strategy and where spirit-possession, with its emphasis on direct divine communication, intervention in crises

and religious mediation, are central to religious experiences” (Kalu 1999). Christian education in the Pentecostal/charismatic arenas is characterized with healing and deliverance/exorcism ministries; vibrant adherence to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ and vigilant pursuit of endowment of spiritual power. The movement has impacted individuals with a sense of personal worth, freedom and empowerment, which are strong attributes for holistic development. However, the loose administrative structures with the movement have witnessed an upsurge of indigenous congregations, including some with cultic tendencies. The result has been many small congregations without a unified voice to guide development agenda. Each congregation can only accomplish little of the holistic development due to limitation of numbers, resources and escalating schisms within churches.

This situation needs to be curbed if holistic community development will be accelerated to any noticeable level. Ife (2009) argues that:

There is a significant problem with the idea of building community around commonality and this needs to be addressed. It is important for communities to be open to change, to be able to accept and indeed welcome difference, to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Rather than building community on commonality or sameness, it is important to explore the building of community on difference . . . communities built on difference can be far more resilient and viable than communities built on commonality.

The east Africa region and indeed the entire African continent can accelerate holistic community development if focus is given on her unique strength, diversity. Diversity should be embraced and its potential in creating resilient communities can be a springboard for holistic community development.

### 3. Conclusion

The church has a mandate to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything . . .” (Matt 28:18-19). Holistic community development is part of God’s agenda and the church stands a great chance to accelerate transformation of people’s lives for the better. Understanding the stance of the church of East Africa today in light of its inception unveils gaps created during the pre-colonial and nurtured through post colonial era. For the church to strategically address these gaps, stakeholders need to unite and forge the way forward as unified army. Overcoming denominational, ethnic and geographical barriers will synergize the church to accelerate holistic development to God’s glory.

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