

Worldview, Challenge of Contextualization and Church Planting in West Africa
– Part 4: Missiological Implications of West African Worldviews

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Considering the worldviews of the West African immigrants in general and of the immigrants in particular, there is no doubt that the missiological implications of their worldviews would be daunting. However, understanding the Great Commission as a call to disciple all nations, *panta ta ethne*--in which West African immigrants are included--it becomes imperative that this is a task that must be performed.

Furthermore, the promise of God’s presence and power should energize the church to step out of its complacency and move in faith because He is already ahead of the churches, preparing the hearts and minds of the immigrants before any missionary steps into the context. In the light of this assurance, here are some of the missiological implications drawn from the West African worldviews as explained in my previous work.¹

Relationship Is Vital

West African immigrants are relational because of their sense of community and their communal worldview. One missiological implication is that they cannot be reached with the gospel using a non relational strategy. Much of the Western worldview

¹Emetuche, Okwudiri Damian. “An Analysis of Worldviews of West African Immigrants to Greater Cincinnati and their Missiological Implications.” Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville KY, 2007.

is mechanistic; it stresses control; it holds people responsible for most failures; it is a highly predictable world; it plans activities; and it holds time and money as precious.

As Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses would argue, the West is time and-future-oriented, high value is placed on time, and efficiency time is linear, uniform, secular, and looks to the future. The West is also visual-oriented; emphasizes analytical

thought system based on abstract reasoning; seeks to understand issues by separating forms and meanings; and differentiates between natural and supernatural phenomenon.² But, West Africans are human-centered and event-oriented; therefore, they stress relationships, sharing, mutual help, and a sense of community. Their time, like for most Africans, is cyclical; it looks to the past and the connectedness with people in a sacred sense. Mbiti remarks,

The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life. For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are inevitably or immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of “No-time.” What is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is in the category of inevitable or potential time. The most significant consequence of this is that, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking.³

Agba Mangalabou, a West African immigrant from Togo--who used to live in Europe--recalled that when he arrived in the United States of America in 2002, “Here (USA), nobody knows if I’m African or American.”⁴ Africans love to talk and share their stories. This could be a missiological opportunity to share the gospel, but the Western worldview could be a hindrance if Christians would be operating in an individualistic mode. Most immigrants would interpret it as lack of love and care.

LaNette W. Thompson, an American missionary serving in West Africa, made the following observations:

We get upset when our plans are thwarted. We assume that if we do things right we will succeed. We want the churches we work with to have constitutions, membership roles, and balanced budgets. We want leaders elected and each member to have one vote. We separate our T.E.E. classes by educational level and expect the students to “fill in the blanks” in their books. Our need for order often confuses those in relational cultures with whom we work. Because relationships are unpredictable,

²Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 125.

³John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1969), 16-17.

⁴Interview with Sam Roberts, “More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery,” *New York Times*, 21 February 2005 [on-line]; accessed 3 August 2006; available from <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=f20717F6355 EOC728EDDAB0894DD404482>; Internet.

relational societies are not uncomfortable with disorder. If friends stop in to visit on one's way to church, one does not usher them out the door but stops and visits for a while. The universe is seen as unpredictable, not rational. Why try to control? When we as American missionaries work in relational cultures, because of the energy we invest in trying to create order, we often achieve conformity to our way of thinking...on the surface. The conformity we see is not because we have succeeded in changing their worldview but because their relationship with us is so important they will do whatever it takes to maintain the relationship. When we leave, however, the need to maintain order leaves with us.⁵

The point being made here is not that the American church should discard her cherished American culture and traditions, like individualism and search for order. God, of course, is the God of order (1 Cor 14:33), as well as the God of relationship or love (1John 4:8). Furthermore, abandoning one's culture would be unfair because it is the culture of a people that makes them unique and sets them apart from other peoples. Moreover, cultural diversity is not a sign of weakness; on the contrary, diversity may represent the beauty of God's whole creation.

Therefore, the issue is not neglecting one's culture and way of life, but being in a position to communicate the gospel message beyond one's own cultural boundaries.

The apostle Paul states,

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1Cor 9:19-23)

In these verses, Paul relates how he conformed to the Jewish customs and identified with Gentiles in their culture for the reason of presenting the gospel. In the same spirit, the American church must be ready to adjust its strategy in order to earn the right of presenting the gospel to the immigrants. Relationship--in this case, intercultural

⁵LaNette W. Thompson, "The American Worldview: How It Impacts Our Ministry," in The Strategy Network [on-line]; accessed 22 July 2006; available from http://www.newway.org/strategy_network/worldview.htm; Internet.

relationship--or communication of the gospel, must consider the following principles as suggested by Charles Kraft:

(1) The purpose of communication is to bring a receptor to understand a message presented by a communicator in a way that substantially corresponds with the intent of the communicator. (2) What is understood is at least as dependent on how the receptor perceives the message (plus the paramessages) as on how the communicator presents it. (3) Communicators present messages via cultural forms (symbols) that stimulate within the receptors' heads meanings that each receptor shapes into the message that he or she ultimately hears. Meanings are not transmitted, only messages. (4) The communicator, to communicate the message effectively, must be receptor-oriented. (5) If the communicator's message is to influence the receptor(s), it must be presented with an appropriate degree of impact. (6) The most impactful communication results from person to person interaction. (7) Communication is most effective when communicator, message and receptor participate in the same context(s), setting(s), or frame(s) of reference. (8) Communication is most effective when the communicator has earned credibility as a respectable human being within the chosen frame of reference. (9) Communication is most effective when message is understood by receptor to relate specifically to life as receptor lives it. (10) Communication is most effective when receptor discovers (i) an ability to identify at least partially with the communicator and (ii) the relevance of the message to his or her own life.⁶

The underlying factor that will enhance effective communication, especially as advocated by Kraft's principles, is relationship. It is through deeper commitment and relationship that one understands the mindset of the other, earns the credibility of another person, and understands the fears and the heartbeats of an individual.

Howard Gardner, who is John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs' Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Senior Director of Harvard Project Zero, insists:

When one trusts a person (or group or institution), one feels at ease, one resonates with that entity. By the same token, a loss of trust--in a parent, a lover, a boss, a president, a company, a medium of information--signals a diminution or disappearance, and a correlative rise in resistance. Much of one's capacity to change the minds of others hinges on whether or not one is trusted, seen as trustworthy, deemed to be a trustee. As with integrity, honesty, truthfulness, trust is not a property than can be faked in the long run. Trust is earned, and must periodically be confirmed.⁷

⁶Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 147-50.

⁷Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), xiv-xv. Project Zero, a "research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has investigated the development of learning processes in children, adults, and organizations since 1967. Today, Project Zero is building on this research to help create communities of reflective, independent learners; to enhance deep understanding within disciplines;

Therefore, to reach out to the West African immigrants, a relationship--a long and sincere friendship--must be developed, as it will build trust, and open doors of sharing the gospel. Roberta M. Gilbert also states, "It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of human relationships. If love does not make the world go around, then surely relationships do. In the world of the personal, the world of work, and the world at large, relationships between people are critical and decisive force."⁸ It should be remembered that a majority of the West Africans are either Muslims or traditionalists, and many barriers have been built to discourage them from becoming believers in Christ.

Islam is not only a religion, but also has dominated, and integrated itself into, the culture of its adherents. Islam, according to J. Christy Wilson, "is a very tightly-knit system. It determines just how every act of life shall be performed, from morning until evening and during the night, and it exercises control over all of life, from the cradle to the grave."⁹

In addition, Islam holds a community devotion and solidarity that Wilson likened to "faith and patriotism combined."¹⁰ West African immigrant Muslims do not emigrate only from a traditional culture that emphasizes community and relationship, but their faith, rooted in Islamic society--the *umma*, which is the brotherhood of Islam--reinforces their sense of community.

According to George W. Braswell, Jr. "The *umma* established by Muhammad cuts across all lines of race, class, tribe, and ethnicity. Religion was integrated with society, and the new community was Muslim."¹¹ Relationship based on kinship was

and to promote critical and creative thinking. Project Zero's mission is to understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic and scientific disciplines, at the individual and institutional levels." To read more concerning Project Zero, see on-line <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/History/History.htm>; Internet.

⁸Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking about Human Interactions* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1992), 3.

⁹J. Christy Wilson, *The Christian Message to Islam* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1950), 7.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹George W. Braswell Jr., *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics, and Power* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 113.

abolished, and all Muslims are regarded and treated as brothers. Muhammad “declared the inviolability of a man’s person, property, and honor. Muslim law establishes the principal crimes: murder, damage to body, fornication and adultery, theft and highway robbery, and consumption of alcoholic beverages.”¹² The Islamic families also tend to be large, strong, and close-knit.

Furthermore, both the family and society serve to provide identity to a Muslim. It is almost unthinkable to do anything without the sanction or approval of the community or to take an action that will bring disrespect to one’s family or community. Phil Parshall insists,

The greatest tragedy in a Muslim’s life is to see dishonor brought upon the family’s name. Such shame will cause internal convulsions within the complete extended – family structures. The hurt, embarrassment, and perplexity of family dishonor will have a negative effect on the name and reputation of future generations.¹³

Therefore, considering the cultural and religious backgrounds of the immigrants, a sincere, long-cultivated relationship will be the first step in reaching them for Christ.

Language Is Critical

The importance of language to the immigrants cannot be overemphasized. Their home languages represent who they are, and the languages are the embodiment of their cultures and traditions. Often, ignorance of a people has resulted in making a caricature of their language and way of life. Eugene A. Nida recalled the statement of a self-styled missionary linguist to a newly appointed missionary, who was about to learn a language of his host culture. The older missionary said, “The language which you are about to study has only about three hundred words and no grammar.”¹⁴

Of course, there is no iota of truth in the statement. Nida argues, “If such statement were to be true, learning the language would be a cinch, but there is no tribe of

¹²Ibid.

¹³Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism* (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel, 2003), 89.

¹⁴Eugene Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 198.

people anywhere in the world which does not have thousands of words in its vocabulary and an intricate, systematic way of putting words together into phrases and sentences, i.e., a grammar.”¹⁵

However, the experiences of a people are generally reflected in their language. Moreover, language would reflect only the world and vocabulary of its people and the environment familiar to them. Regarding language, West African immigrants are like Hispanic immigrants; they love to speak their native languages because their languages represent who they are.

These West Africans speak their native languages at home, socio-cultural events, and religious ceremonies. Therefore, any strategy designed for reaching out to the West African immigrants with the gospel must seriously consider employing the immigrants’ languages. In the national debate about immigration, one of the arguments against the immigrants is that some have failed to assimilate, have failed to abandon their culture, and continue to speak only their native languages.

In the month of May 2006, during the Senate debate on immigration, Senator James Inhofe from Oklahoma made a spirited effort for convincing the Senate to consider an amendment to the immigration bill. In the said amendment, he sought to declare English the official language of the United States, which is an indication of uneasiness toward the use of other languages in the United States.¹⁶

Moreover, according to a national survey conducted by Zogby International in 2006, 84 percent of Americans favor making English the official language, which is again an indication of the national feeling attached to the speaking of English as the American language.¹⁷ It is natural for the Americans to feel this way, as English

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶“Senate Democratic Leadership Blocks Sen. Inhofe’s (R-OK) Official English Amendment,” The ProEnglish Advocate [on-line]; accessed 23 February 2007; available from <http://www.proenglish.org/may2006.htm>; Internet.

¹⁷Ibid. Zogby International is a polling, market-research, and information-service agent. For more about its polling and other market-related research, see on-line <http://www.zogby.com/>; Internet.

represents the dominant culture and tradition of the people in the United States of America. Furthermore, the people in question are immigrants; they have come from their various countries to this nation in search of the American dream; and, therefore, they are obligated to adjust, and acculturate to the American culture and language.

However, it should be noted that most of these immigrants (West Africans, in particular) understand English enough to function in the American society. In fact, their educational attainment surpasses that of the national average. According to available studies, three-quarters of African-born residents in the United States have some college experience, and one in four of them has an advanced degree. These impressive figures surpass the figures for native-born Americans; when contrasted with other immigrant groups, “Nearly 88 percent of adults who immigrate from Africa to the US have a high school education or higher. The national average for native borns is 77 percent. Only 76 percent of Asian immigrants and 46 percent of Central-Americans are high school graduates.”¹⁸

Therefore, the adherence to their respective indigenous languages by the immigrants is one of the manifestations of their cultures. The language defines who they are and gives them cultural identity, which sets them apart from the rest of human beings. For example, as O’Brien pointed out, “To choose to speak Wolof, most of the time, is to enter a distinguishable area, if not of sharply defined ethnicity then often of a particular style of religiously styled interaction, in the accommodationist tradition of Senegal’s Sufi brotherhoods.”¹⁹

Missiologically, it becomes imperative for the church to engage the immigrants in their heart language in order to share the gospel with them. Charles Kraft notes, “When God speaks he chooses to employ the cultural and linguistic frame of reference in which

¹⁸Gabeyehu Adugna, “African Immigration in Modern Era” [on-line]; accessed 25 February 2007; available from <http://orionle.umd.edu/~mddl/791/communities/html/africanmd.html>; Internet.

¹⁹Donal B. Cruse O’Brien, *Symbolic Confrontations: Muslims Imagining the State in Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 121.

those to whom he speaks are immersed. And the result is that the supracultural-cultural gap is bridged and communication can take place.”²⁰

Evidence of Kraft’s observation is in the account of Pentecost as recorded in the second chapter of Acts of the Apostles. The Jews in Diaspora, who had come to Jerusalem to worship, could understand perfectly the Aramaic language of the Jewish nation (as seen in their response to Peter’s message); God, through the gift of tongues (languages), spoke to the people in sixteen heart languages, declaring His wonders. God, it would appear, desires that His gospel be shared with all people via the medium of their heart languages.

About the challenge of learning other languages, William Carey’s answer to his contemporaries still stands for the church today.

The missionaries must have patience, and mingle with the people, till they have learned so much of their language as to be able to communicate their ideas to them in it. It is well known to require no very extraordinary talents to learn, in the space of a year, or two at most, the language of any people upon earth, so much of it at least, as to be able to convey any sentiments we wish to their understandings.²¹

Eugene Nida more emphatically states,

Failure to learn foreign languages results primarily from false attitudes toward culture. A superiority complex fortified by a paternalistic air is about the worst liability for effective language learning. Our ethnocentrism makes it difficult for us to “let ourselves go,” for we dread making mistakes, not realizing that languages cannot be mastered until we have thoroughly murdered them.²²

Holistic Ministry Approach

The nature of the West African worldviews as a complementary dualism (which is akin to animism), and the challenges that immigrants face in their effort to acculturate in their host culture demand that any ministry to them must be holistic in nature. In contemporary mission, the debate regarding holistic mission seems to have abated among the evangelicals. The evangelical reactions today appear to be different in

²⁰Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 171.

²¹William Carey, “An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2002), 298.

²²Nida, *Customs and Cultures*, 222.

contrast with the evangelicals of the early twentieth century and the twenty-first century, when holistic mission was one of the hottest debated issues in missiology.

The controversy concerning holistic mission polarized believers of different persuasions, from liberals to conservatives. Discussion became more heated after the end of colonialism and the rise of non-Western churches. The evangelicals reached a measure of consensus through conferences and consultations, like the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. However, some still doubt the place of holistic mission in evangelization because of the challenges and the potential risks involved.

Definition of Holistic Mission

Holistic, as it pertains to Christian mission or ministry, is derived from the term “holism,” according to John Stott, which is a “philosophical notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”²³ Stott regrets that this notion “is perhaps not a very satisfactory epithet to apply to the Christian mission. Yet, it is intended to emphasize that authentic mission is a comprehensive activity which embraces evangelism and social action, and refuses to let them be divorced.”²⁴ John Steward agrees, but insists that etymologically the Greek word *holos*, meaning “whole,” “wholly,” or “complete,” is used in the Scriptures (Matt 5:29-30; Acts 3:16; John 9:34); but “the English ‘wholly’ and ‘holy’ (Greek *hagios*), frequently confused, are not the same, although the latter is impossible without the former. The Hebrew word closest to *holos* is possibly *shalom*.”²⁵

Steward argues that holism is based on the lordship of Christ in every part of life; furthermore, sin affects life holistically in broken relationships and stewardship. In addition, as part of the consequences of sin, the ownership of God is ignored or usurped. Therefore, “Redemption is about reversing the effect of the fall; it is multidimensional.”²⁶

²³John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1992), 337.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵John Steward, “Holism, Biblical,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 448.

²⁶*Ibid.*

Mission from this perspective “is no longer seen in terms of priorities, but as parts of the whole. The scope of the gospel is the same as the scope of sin and its effects. Because sin is holistic, it is imperative that the gospel be holistic.”²⁷ Holistic mission, in essence, is concerned with the presentation and application of the gospel to the whole person, and the transformation of not only the spiritual life, but also the socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental systems that influence the person.

Douglas McConnell writes, “While holistic mission affirms the functional uniqueness of evangelism and social responsibility, it views them as inseparable from the ministry of the kingdom of God. Therefore, holistic mission is the intentional integration of building the church and transforming society.”²⁸ John Cheyne, in an article in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* that is titled “Strategies for Humanitarian Ministries,” argues that the word “holistic, which could refer to the sum total of the parts, as in whole . . . is not actually found in the dictionary. However, holistic is a symbiotic term from the field of biology.”²⁹ The term symbiotic, Cheyne insists, is “made up of the Greek prefix sym, meaning interdependence, and a Greek morpheme bios, meaning life. Together they depict the harmonious living together of two functionally dissimilar organisms in a way beneficial to each other.”³⁰

When this symbiotic term is applied to evangelism and social ministry, “It is best described as a relationship which is obligatory in some sense—one partner being unable to live without the other, or each depending heavily on the other.”³¹

Consequently, in applying this symbiotic concept to mission context, Cheyne holds, “We

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Douglas McConnell, “Holistic Mission,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 448.

²⁹John Cheyne, “Strategies for Humanitarian Ministries,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed., John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 517.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

must recognize that humanity's spiritual nature cannot be dealt with in isolation from human circumstance, whether that be social, political, physical, psychological, or otherwise."³²

John Stott, arguing in the same vein, understands the relationship between social activity and evangelism to be like a partner. According to Stott, it is like the "two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird, as they were in the public ministry of Jesus. The partnership is, in reality, a marriage."³³ Therefore, in contemporary missiological works, holistic mission is now defined as "mission that takes into account the whole of human needs; spiritual, social, and personal. Holistic mission includes evangelism and church planting as well as development and social transformation."³⁴

Holistic Mission in Historical Context

Holistic mission, according to Rene Padilla, does not lack historical precedent. Padilla observes that some of the words or terms in use today may be new. However, "Throughout the history of the church there have always been groups of Christians who, by the way they have participated in the extension of the gospel, have demonstrated a deep solidarity with human suffering and needs."³⁵ Padilla cites the Moravians and their leader, Nicolaus Zinzendorf (1700-1760), as outstanding examples of what is known today as holistic mission. For Nicolaus Zinzendorf, Padilla insists, "The agent of mission was not the institutional church, which was marked by dead orthodoxy, but small communities of committed believers, the *ecclesiola in ecclesiae*."³⁶

³²Ibid., 518.

³³Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 340.

³⁴Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15.

³⁵Rene Padilla, "Holistic Mission," an occasional paper delivered at the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, 29 September to 5 October 2004, 18 [on-line]; accessed 13 October 2005; available from http://www.community.gospelcom.net/lcwe/assets/lop33_194.pdf; Internet.

³⁶Ibid.

Pursuant to this line of thought, small teams of Moravian “missionaries were sent with the aim of forming ‘pilgrim houses’ or ‘emergency residences’ instead of churches like the ones in Europe.”³⁷ Padilla concludes that the ministry of the Moravians led Francke and other pietists

to become involved in “home mission” in Halle and the surrounding area, serving the destitute and founding a school for poor children, a home for widows, an orphanage, a hospital and other institutions. Under this influence, Germany became a leading missionary country.³⁸

The joint publication of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship--held at Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 19-25, 1982--states, “It appears to us that evangelism and social concern have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the church, although the relationship has been expressed in a variety of ways.”³⁹ The writers of the paper observed that “Christian people have often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling any need to define what they were doing or why.”⁴⁰ They also indicate that the difficulty in the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility was a recent development.

To buttress their point, the consultation recounts the mission activities of the Great Awakening in North America, the Pietistic Movement in Germany, and the Evangelical Revival under Wesley in Britain, all of which took place in the early part of the eighteenth century. They were all helpful in stimulating great philanthropy as well as evangelism. The result was that the next generation of British evangelicals founded missionary societies and gave conspicuous service in public life. Some notable examples were William Wilberforce--in the abolition of slavery--and Antony Ashley Cooper, later Lord Shaftesbury in the improvement of factory workers’ conditions.⁴¹

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 19.

³⁹“Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment,” 8 [on-line]; accessed on 13 October 2005; available from http://community.gospelcom.net/printable_template.jsp?show_print=no&backPageID=14; Internet.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

However, in reaction to the intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment, biblical criticism, and Darwinianism, James A. Patterson notes that in the nineteenth century, some European and American Protestants called for significant readjustments of the traditional Christian doctrines. The result was a liberal paradigm, which included:

(1) a stronger emphasis on God's Immanence; (2) a more optimistic assessment of human nature and technology; (3) a greater skepticism about many elements of Christian supernaturalism; (4) a marked propensity to subordinate dogmatic concerns to the pragmatic demands of building the kingdom of God on earth; and (5) a greater willingness to accommodate the Christian message to modern culture.⁴²

Patterson again states, "By the late nineteenth century, the impact of theological revisionism began to penetrate the missionary enterprise. In particular, a conflict among the American Congregationalists concerning the eternal destiny of the unevangelized led some to modify claims about the absoluteness and finality of the Christian faith."⁴³

The 1982 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship Consultation recognized this shift when it observed that:

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the so-called "social gospel" was developed by theological liberals. Some of them confused the kingdom of God with Christian civilization in general, and with social democracy in particular, and they went on to imagine that by their social programs they could build God's kingdom on earth. It seems to have been in over-reaction to this grave distortion of the gospel that many evangelicals became suspicious of social involvement.⁴⁴

The rediscovery of the holistic mission among the evangelicals had to wait until the 1960s, according to Samuel Escobar. The recovery, Escobar argues, "was occasioned by the experience of churches whose evangelistic work took place in countries or social classes going through painful processes of social transformation."⁴⁵ Furthermore, he notes, "Latin Americans, Africans and Asians, as well as African Americans and Latinos in the United States insisted that evangelism and mission could

⁴²James A. Patterson, "Liberal Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 572.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴"Evangelism and Social Responsibility," 8.

⁴⁵Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 145.

not be carried on in faithfulness to biblical standards unless this holistic dimension was taken into account.”⁴⁶ Escobar credits Billy Graham for the series of congresses that addressed the social concerns of world evangelization.

However, while Billy Graham receives the credit as the convener of the Lausanne congresses, Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell insist that it was the work of Latino evangelicals--like Rene Padilla, Emilio Nunez, and Samuel Escobar--that challenged “other evangelicals to see evangelism in its biblical wholeness. Salvation is certainly liberation from sin, but it is also liberation from the kingdom of darkness and entrance into a life distinct from the sinful patterns of the world.”⁴⁷ Beginning with the Lausanne Convention in 1974, it is arguably the voices of these Latino brothers, among others, that “caused John Stott to think, write, and speak more openly about the social dimension of Christian responsibility.”⁴⁸

Contemporary Debate Concerning Holistic Mission

John Stott records that, for at least the last thirty years, there has been considerable disagreement about the relationship between evangelism and social action. According to him, the debate started within the ecumenical community, but more recently has occurred among the evangelicals. The debate, Stott states, has been framed in different ways:

As the tension ‘between God’s action in and through the church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community’; ‘between the vertical interpretation of the gospel as essentially concerned with God’s saving action in the life of individuals, and horizontal interpretation of it as mainly concerned with human relationship in the world’; between God seeking the justification of sinners and God seeking justice in and among nations; between redemption and providence, the salvation of the soul and the improvement of society.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Ibid., 145-46.

⁴⁷Pocock, Van Rhee, and McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 145.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 337. See also R. K. Orchard ed. *Witness in Six Continents* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), 157, and W.A. Visser’t Hooft in Norman Goodall ed. *The Uppsala 1968 Report* (WCC, 1968).

Furthermore, Stott argues, “At times the difference between these viewpoints has not been a tension only, but a sterile polarization, usually along the lines of the evangelical-liberal divide, each overreacting to the other position.”⁵⁰ This debate could be discovered in the writings of Johannes Christian Hoekendijk of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the works of church growth scholars.

For Hoekendijk, “*The world is the horizon of mission. The church does not carry on mission—it is mission. It is the church only insofar as it allows itself to be used by God for the oikoumene, understood as the whole inhabited world.*”⁵¹ Therefore, the mission of the church should be demonstrated in social actions and ministry, the struggle for justice, and world peace. To this school of thought, evangelism and church planting are but little fragments of the mission of the church. The primary task of the church is to be engaged in the mission of God, *Missio Dei*.⁵²

At the other end of the pendulum are the scholars of the Church Growth Movement. David J. Hesselgrave insists that the “primary mission of the church is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and to gather believers into local churches where they can be built up in faith and made effective in service thereby planting new congregations throughout the world.”⁵³ Donald A. McGavran, in his reaction to the debate, insists, “Deeply as I sympathize with the problem and as long as I myself have ministered to desperate physical needs (for years I superintended a leprosy home), I cannot ally myself on this point with those who put social action first.”⁵⁴ On the contrary, McGavran

⁵⁰Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 337.

⁵¹Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission & World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 125.

⁵²Harvey T. Hoekstva, *The World Council of Churches and the Demise of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1979), 91-97.

⁵³David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 20. See idem, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 17; and Hesselgrave’s latest book on the subject, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

⁵⁴Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 33.

states, “My conviction is that the salvation granted to those who believe in Jesus Christ is still the supreme need of human beings, and all other human good flows from that prior reconciliation to God.”⁵⁵

However, Padilla--a leading Latin American evangelical theologian who incidentally contributed much in the shaping of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization position in respect to the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility--contends that

There is no place for an “otherworldliness” that does not result in a Christian’s commitment to his neighbor, rooted in the gospel. There is no room for eschatological paralysis nor for a social strike. There is no place for statistics on how many souls die without Christ every minute if they do not take into account how many of those who die are dying of hunger.⁵⁶

In other words, Padilla is arguing that the mission of the church involves both proclamation and social action. He takes seriously the spiritual needs of the world without overlooking the physical felt need. As for those who doubt his commitment to spiritual needs and proclamation, he writes that the gospel “cannot be reduced to social, economic, and political categories, nor the church to an agency for human improvement. Even less can the gospel be confused with political ideology or the church a political party.”⁵⁷

Padilla recognizes the fact that the church is called out to witness and proclaim the transcendental message to all people in Christ. He insists that nothing can substitute for the spiritual regeneration, and salvation cannot be tantamount to the satisfaction of felt needs, socio-economic amelioration, and political freedom. However, a genuine gospel, while proclaiming repentance and faith in Christ, will also be concerned with human suffering, poverty, and justice, as negligence in these areas will betray the gospel that is preached.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Rene C. Padilla, *Mission between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 24-25.

⁵⁷Ibid., 41.

The book of James (2:14-17) is often used to support this point. The passage reads,

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (NIV)

Consequently, Padilla declares,

I refuse, therefore, to drive a wedge between a primary task--namely, the proclamation of the gospel—and secondary (at best) or even optional (at worst) task of the church. In order to be obedient to its Lord, the church should never do anything that is not essential; therefore, nothing that the church does in obedience to its Lord is unessential. Why? Because love for God is inseparable from love for our neighbor; because faith without works is dead; because hope includes restoration of all things to the kingdom of God.⁵⁸

Benigno Beltran blames the argument on worldview differences. According to him, Western thinking in general has been influenced by the dualistic nature of platonic philosophy. He writes, "Plato taught that the soul existed before one is born into the world. The body is the prison of the soul, and matter is considered evil. To find the true self, a person has to be guided by values of the spirit so he or she may return to the pure contemplation of ideas."⁵⁹

It is this platonic world of the senses and intelligible world of ideas that sowed the seeds for "Descartes' dichotomy between the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, between thinking and extended substances, Leibnitz's separation of actual and possible worlds, Kant's serving the *noumena* from the *phenomena*."⁶⁰ Beltran concludes that Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are all "descendants of this kind of thinking, resulting in a dichotomy that opens up between an inert God, who cannot be known in himself, and the world of phenomena, conceived as a closed continuum of cause and effect."⁶¹

⁵⁸Padilla, *Mission between the Times*, 42.

⁵⁹Benigno Beltran, "Toward a Theology of Holistic Ministry," in *Serving with the Urban Poor*, ed. Tetsunao Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers, and Kenneth L. Luscombe (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1988), 179.

⁶⁰Ibid., 180.

⁶¹Ibid.

Stott devotes time to addressing some of the objections to holistic mission. *First, shouldn't Christians steer clear of politics?*⁶² In response, he says that although most Christians would agree on social services (like philanthropy), many are not too sure about social action (i.e., political involvement). Arguing from a broader definition of politics (life of the polis, the city), the act of living and sharing together in a community, he insists that it is an act of loving our neighbor.

Second, *isn't this going back to the old social gospel?* He replies in the negative by distinguishing the social gospel of the theological liberalism, which seeks to identify the socialized society, with the kingdom of God in the tradition of Walter Rauschenbusch and the social implications of the biblical gospel. To the believer in Christ, it is a call to be salt and light in the world.

Third, *isn't this social concern the same as liberation theology?* Again, Stott answers negatively. Contrary to liberation theology that equates social, political, and economic liberation of humanity to salvation, the Bible offers true liberation from sin to every other thing that demeans and dehumanizes people from pleasing God.

Fourth, *isn't it impossible to expect social change unless people are converted?* Stott states that it will be desirable to see people come to salvation in Christ. But believers do not have to wait for conversions before becoming involved in social activities. Christian involvement, on the other hand, may open doors for witness and conversion.

Fifth, *won't commitment to social action distract us from evangelism?* Yes, Stott affirms the possibility of distraction, but insists that it need not. Social action, rather than being an obstacle or a diversion, could in a positive manner contribute to making evangelism more effective.⁶³

⁶²Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 249. Note that all the questions to which John Stott responded are written in italics for emphasis.

⁶³Ibid., 249-52.

Biblical Basis for Holistic Mission

In his book, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, J. H. Bavinck says that the Scriptures are “never concerned with preaching alone, but are concerned with all other elements constituting the environment in which preaching takes place.”⁶⁴ Bavinck observes that it is evident from the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus that His entry, works, and the manner in which He conducted himself among diverse groups of people were all included within the greater context of His official work. In Acts 1:1, Luke refers to what Jesus “began both to do and to teach.” Bavinck argues, “Luke even mentions what Jesus did before mentioning what he taught. And Jesus himself pointed with emphasis to the fact that he had a greater witness than that of John.”⁶⁵

An example of Jesus’ pointing to His work is in John 5:36, “I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.” In this regard, Bavinck concludes, “The wonders of Jesus are closely connected with the kingship of God. As convincing ‘signs’ of the kingdom of heaven, they belong to the new world order, in which God will disclose his kingly power in this world.”⁶⁶

Arthur F. Glasser, in the same manner, affirms that “when Jesus stated that the kingdom is dynamically moving into human history and sweeping over people violently (Matt 11:22), he was referring to a new world, a new state of affairs, a new community.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, this new world is “the good realm where the realities of redemption are granted and received, where the conditions of fulfillment are realized and evil is no more at work. It is political (as) its path toward realization lies on a collision

⁶⁴J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 90.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., 91.

⁶⁷Arthur F. Glasser et al., *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 189.

course with all human rule or authority.”⁶⁸ Glasser observes that, while Satan is determined to thwart the progress of the kingdom of God, Jesus calmly asserts His authority and will exercise this rule until “the dominion of Satan, sin, and death are not only challenged but also brought to a complete end (cf. Mark 9:1, 13:26, 14:62 with Luke 11:20-22).”⁶⁹

John Stott, on his own biblical basis for the holistic mission, refers to the character of God. He is both the Creator and Redeemer; He cares about the total wellbeing (spiritual and material) of all peoples He has made.

On the one hand, God yearns after his creatures in their lostness. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and is not willing that any should perish. So he begs them to listen to his word, to return to him in penitence, and to receive his forgiveness. On the other hand, God cares for the poor and the hungry, the alien, the widow and the orphan. He denounces oppression and tyranny, and calls for justice. He tells his people to be the voice of the voiceless and defender of the powerless, and so to express their love for them. It is neither an accident nor a surprise, therefore, that God’s two great commandments are that we love him with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves.⁷⁰

The other reasons Stott offers for holistic ministry are the ministry and teaching of Jesus. He not only announced the kingdom of God, but also demonstrated its arrival by deeds of compassion and power. “There was in his ministry an indissoluble bond between evangelism and compassionate service. He exhibited in action the love of God he was proclaiming.”⁷¹

Mark R. Gornik examines Luke 4:16-21. Jesus, in this inaugural manifesto, announces the in-breaking reign of God as a period of messianic liberation. With the words of Luke 4:18-19,

Jesus announces his ministry of making all things new and restoring right relationships; Jesus is drawing attention to the jubilee, employing it as an image of God’s reign. In the jubilee, the world is made right for the poor, the outcast, the sick,

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 343.

⁷¹Ibid., 345.

the struggling, and the unwanted. In the Jubilee work of Christ on the cross, the powers are defeated.⁷²

For Gornik, because of the multidimensional character of sin, “Salvation is a message of grace, reconciliation, justice, and healing. It knows no boundaries between social and religious, or physical and spiritual. Nor is it confined to an Enlightenment definition of the world. Deeds and words are parts of a whole.”⁷³

Another scriptural foundation for holistic mission is found in the account of creation. McConnell argues, “Holistic mission begins with creation in perfect harmony under the lordship of God (Gen 1-2) and humans in relationship with their creator as stewards of his creation (Gen 1:27-30). The entry of sin and the consequent judgment affected every aspect of creation.”⁷⁴ However, human beings were not abandoned. Instead, God made provision for their salvation by calling out a people (Gen 12:1-3; Exod 15:2-13) and commanding them to be holy.

The story of the Old Testament is a holistic encounter of God with the people of Israel. McConnell insists that when it comes to the New Testament, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom and reclaimed all that was lost in the Fall.⁷⁵ As a result, to be holistic in ministry, according to these authors, is to be biblical; it is following in the footsteps of Jesus in His words and deeds; it is prophetically engaging the society and attending to the needs of the poor and the oppressed. Holistic ministry is demonstrating the love of God, not only in the proclamation of repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, but also in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and seeking justice.

Challenge of Holistic Mission

⁷²Mark R. Gornik, “Doing the Word: Biblical Holism and Urban Ministry,” in *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World*, ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 189.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 192.

⁷⁴McConnell, “Holistic Mission,” 448.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 448-49.

Holistic mission can be challenging, especially when one has to engage in social, environmental, or political activism. There is no doubt that true spiritual change will have moral and cultural implications for both the believer and his or her context. However, how much of these involvements (transformations) can be referred to as missions is still an unresolved issue. As Stephen Neill says, “If everything is mission, then nothing is mission.”⁷⁶

The greatest problem in holistic mission or ministry is not its theological rightness or wrongness because even the severest critic recognizes the need for meeting felt needs (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, freeing the oppressed, and social justice). However, there is always the tendency for social involvement to overshadow the gospel’s proclamation. The reality of this can be seen in the sixth chapter of book of Acts, in which social ministry almost derailed the progress of the ministry of the early church had it not been for the wise and timely intervention of the apostles.

Therefore, while it is true that all Christians are called to be the light and salt of the earth, the engagement of missionaries in socio-cultural and political transformation may not be desirable. It may be more useful for the kingdom work if the missionaries equip the nationals, and, in turn--as true believers who understand their socio-cultural context--they would be able to affect the necessary changes. Even in the distribution of food and clothing, and ministering to the poor, it would be proper to work in collaboration with the local believers.

The recovery of holistic mission by evangelicals is commendable, but it calls for prudence in the execution of the ministry. The church should be mindful of the

⁷⁶Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959), 81. For more discussion on the subject, “Is everything mission?” see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 511-19; and Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Irvine, CA: Regnum, 1999), 225-35.

lessons of colonialism and the medieval church, which became so attached to the state that working for the church became synonymous with working for the state. While it is true that the kingdom of God is partly “already,” the church must not equate the temporary world with it. There is still the “not yet” of the kingdom and, since it is through repentance and faith that one can enter the kingdom, it becomes imperative that proclamation must not be neglected and social needs should not be abandoned.

In conclusion, the challenge of holistic ministry is not merely a biblical or a theological issue. One is confronted with practical issues of life, like poverty, justice, equality, and oppression. Hence, there is a need to strike a balance. The ministry of Jesus remains the perfect model of holistic mission. He ministered to the physical needs of the people, but He also challenged the multitude (John 6) to look beyond physical food to spiritual food that will last.

Therefore, immigrants--by their nature--are strangers in a foreign land (in the case of West African immigrants in the United States seeking the American dream); they need love, care, and hospitality before the gospel can be proclaimed effectively to them, as a reminder that there is more to life than the American dream. There is a better dream: a life of eternity with God through Christ Jesus.

House Church Strategy

Another missiological implication is that, in view of the community emphasis of the West African immigrants, it seems that the house church model would serve well in evangelizing and discipling the immigrants. African cultures and the Islamic faith all sanction polygamy. While it is openly practiced in Africa, in the United States, immigrants who are polygamous keep it secret to avoid legal implications. The polygamous practice has resulted in large families that are strong and closely knit.

Therefore, it may be necessary to start home-based community Bible study classes that could pave the way for conversion. If family heads and leaders will open their

homes for the study of God's Word using storying methods, it may open the door for not only sharing the gospel, but also preparing the families for support and solidarity when they repent and are converted to the Christian faith.

This method will not only produce strong believers, but also faithful believers who may be able to stand against pressure, persecution, and estrangement from the former community. This strategy will be in the form of house churches. House churches, because of their nature and structure, would serve Muslim-background believers or would-be believers best because it will be difficult for them to identify with traditional church easily. In order to appreciate the house church strategy, it will be necessary to distinguish between a house church and a regular traditional church. Charles Van Engen suggests that one of the ways to define the church is to study the word '*ekklesia*,' a word used at "least seventy-three times in the New Testament to refer to the church."⁷⁷

The word *ekklesia*, Van Engen points out, was derived from "*ek* and *kaleo* and (speaks of) the assembly of free citizens in the Greek city states who through a herald were 'called out' of their homes to the market place. In ordinary usage the word denoted the people as assembled, the public meeting."⁷⁸ Therefore, he argues, the term *ekklesia* "indicated the self-consciousness of the early Christians, who saw themselves as the continuation of what God had begun in the wilderness with the nation of Israel, called together by the proclamation of the Gospel for the purpose of belonging to God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁹

Steve Atkerson and Tim Wilson think that *ekklesia* "was used almost without exception to refer to the political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of

⁷⁷Charles Van Engen, "Church," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions*, 192.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

making decisions.”⁸⁰ They identified six usages of *ekklesia* (church) in the New Testament. The first was in Acts 19:23-41 (especially, in vv. 25, 32, 39, and 41). In these passages, *ekklesia* means an assembly, a legal assembly and, here, assembly refers to the meeting of the craftsmen (19:24), who were ‘called’ (19:25) together by Demetrius into the theater (19:31) to decide what to do with Paul.⁸¹ The second usage of *ekklesia*, in Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12, refers to the gathering of the Israelites in the desert at Mount Sinai, where they received God’s legislation through Moses and decided to abide by it.⁸²

The third usage was in Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-18, and 14:4-5. In these verses, *ekklesia* referred to the regularly scheduled, duly convened assembly of Christians, in which they held open discussions, rendered decisions about sin, and ate the Lord’s Supper.⁸³ The fourth usage was in Acts 8:1 and Romans 16:1, in which *ekklesia* referred to the totality of all Christians living in a particular place.

The New Testament authors, according to Atkerson and Wilson, wrote of one church (singular) in Jerusalem, one in Rome, etc. However, the churches in a given city may have never assembled in one place, although the church in Jerusalem and in Corinth may have been exceptions.⁸⁴ The fifth usage was in Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, and the second verse of Philemon; *ekklesia* took the form of regular assemblies convened in a member’s house. Finally, in Matthew 16:18, Acts 9:31, and Ephesians 1:22, 3:10, 20-21, and 5:23, *ekklesia* assumed the significance of the totality of the body of Christ, the universal church.⁸⁵

⁸⁰Steve Atkerson and Tim Wilson, “I Will Build My Church,” in *Toward a House Church Theology*, ed. Steve Atkerson (Atlanta: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1998), 63.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 65.

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³*Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

In light of this understanding, Atkerson and Wilson contend that, in the New Testament, the church is not the coming together of God's people, but what happens when they come together. Today, the word "church" is understood in different ways--such as denomination, baptized members of a local assembly, or even a building--depending on one's ecclesiastical tradition. Nevertheless, for Atkerson and Wilson, Christians are "expected by the Lord to enforce the law of Christ (within the family of God) and deal with issues as they arise. This is a part of what is to occur in the open, participatory church meetings."⁸⁶

Therefore, the word "church" --in the broadest sense--will connote the idea of "called out ones, those who have been called out of the world into a relationship with the Father, through the atoning death of his Son, by the working of the Holy Spirit."⁸⁷ Nate Krupp notes that, whenever the Scriptures mention of the church, "It never means a building, it never refers to a denomination, and it is never used in referring to an organization, only people."⁸⁸ We are the church, he affirmed. "We don't go to the church, we don't join the church, we don't have a church, we are the church."⁸⁹ The church is the people Jesus died to save--people who would be in a loving relationship with Him and in loving right relationship with one another.⁹⁰

While all churches share in the same root as called-out people from the world, Arthur Foster insists the house churches are distinct from any other form of the church. This is because they are usually a "group of persons, usually fifteen to twenty in number, who form an intentional community conceived as a small church which is part of the

⁸⁶Ibid., 67.

⁸⁷Nate Krupp, *God's Simple Plan for His Church and Your Place in It: A Manual for House Churches* (Woodburn, OR: Solid Rock., 1993), 19.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., 20.

⁹⁰Ibid.

whole of the church.”⁹¹ This community meets together as a church for mutual healings, member sustenance and guidance, celebration, fellowship, and mobilizing energies for service beyond the house churches.⁹²

In other words, a house church is a group of people “small enough to meet face to face, who have covenanted with each other to be the church under the authority of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”⁹³ Lois Barrett states that, “A house church often meets in the homes, although it may sometimes meet in a public building. But more important than the place of meeting is the closeness of relationships implied by the word home.”⁹⁴

Distinctiveness of House Churches

In most traditional churches, there are small groups, like Bible study groups, interest groups, support groups, etc. There are also cell churches, of which a good number of the cells meet at home; yet, they are different from a house church. For instance, members of the house churches may come together to pursue interests, tasks, and needs just like support groups, interest groups, accountability groups, or even cell churches.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, house churches are quite distinct; and one of the distinguishing factors according to Robert and Julia Banks, is the “strong emphasis on becoming a Christian family by building a common life with God and one another over a long period.”⁹⁶

House churches are independent, and the various “members gather primarily to concentrate on God and each other, in addition to growing into personal maturity,

⁹¹ Arthur L. Foster, “Dimensions of House Church Experiencing,” in *The House Church Evolving*, ed. Arthur L. Foster (Chicago: Exploration, 1976), 3.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Lois Barrett, *Building the House Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986), 18.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Robert Banks and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 107.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

witnessing more effectively, and supporting and caring for each other.”⁹⁷ Wolfgang Simson argues, “House churches emerge when truly converted people stop living their own lives for their own ends, start living a community life according to the values of the kingdom of God, and start to share their lives and resources with those Christians and not-yet Christians around themselves.”⁹⁸

In many respects, according to Simson, house churches are like an extended family: relational, spontaneous, and organic; therefore, they do not “need a higher level of organization, bureaucracy and ceremonies than any ordinary large family.”⁹⁹ In the meetings of the house churches, there are certain elements that must be present. An article in *House 2 House Magazine* states, “It would be ludicrous to think nailing a steeple to the roof of a house would make it a house church. House church is not really about a change of location, it is about a change in the way we do church.”¹⁰⁰

Hence, features that characterize almost every house church are food; teaching; sharing materials and spiritual blessings; and prayer. Simson agreed. However, he attests that these elements “seem to be like the basic skeleton of the house churches of almost all times.”¹⁰¹ Felicity Dale also, in her article on the DNA of the house church, listed the basic components of a house church: prayer, following the Holy Spirit through Bible study, commitment to evangelism and growth, intentional and strategic church planting, and reproducible models. She said the DNA is passed on to the faithful members through prayer, practical teaching, and on-the-job training.¹⁰²

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World* (Waynesboro, O M Publishing, 2001), 79.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰“So What Is a House Church?” *House 2 House, Special Issue* (2002), 4.

¹⁰¹Simson, *Houses That Change the World*, 81.

¹⁰²Felicity Dale, “House Church DNA,” *House 2 House*, 3, (2001), 37-39.

Structurally, most house churches reclaim the New Testament fivefold ministry (Eph 4); however, elders and deacons direct the individual house churches. Nate Krupp observes that “elders have the responsibility of the spiritual oversight of the church, deacons have the responsibility of the practical oversight of the church.”¹⁰³ In contrast to the traditional churches, the apostles appoint the house church elders who function in plurality.

Additionally, in most house churches, the church’s ministers, apostles, prophets, and evangelists rotate from house to house, while the leadership of the local church rests with the elders. Simson reaffirmed this fact when he said, “The house churches are led by elders; the elders are constantly equipped and trained by people who have been called by God for one of the five-fold ministries.”¹⁰⁴

Potential Missionary Force

One characteristic that West African immigrants possess in common, regardless of their ethno-linguistic backgrounds and religious affiliations, is their attachment to the homeland. In fact, there is no West African immigrant, who is in a position to travel to Africa, who does not travel back to his or her ancestral home at least once or twice a year. For many, rest and pleasure are in Africa, while America is the land of toil and labor.

One question numerous Americans often ask is, “Will the African immigrants return to Africa?” The answer is ambivalent. Would they return immediately after their studies? No; immigrants used to return to their home country immediately in the 1960s, 1970s, and part of the 1980s. By then, the economy of most of the African countries was good. It was a period of nation-building after colonialism. Many of the nations were in

¹⁰³Krupp, *God’s Simple Plan for His Church and Your Place in It*, 93-94.

¹⁰⁴Simson, *Houses That Change the World*, 144.

need of leaders and specialists. There were opportunities and jobs, and the Africans studying abroad had no reason to remain in their host countries.

However, with the collapse of the economy, infrastructures, and basic necessities of life, many of the immigrant students and professionals had remained abroad after training. Nevertheless, the immigrants had not forgotten their communities, their roots, and the welfare of their people.

Most immigrants, even those established in the American dream, still wish to—and frequently return home after they have acquired enough education and material wealth, and have established a financial base, to sustain themselves and their families back in Africa. Others return in their old age, after a long career in the United States, to join politics or take up an advisory role in Africa as an elder statesman.

Culturally, no West African immigrant would like to grow old in the United States. For example, Ugbo, an established West African immigrant at the time of this research is building a mansion in his village for his retirement, where he is expected in African culture to be revered, honored, and much-sought after. Following his death, he will be given a suitable burial and would be expected to join his ancestors. This is in contrast to remaining in America, where he may likely end up in an assisted living home and would die without the elaborate burial customs.

In Africa generally, and in West Africa in particular, as Asare Opoku pointed out, “Old age has a touch of venerability; the ancestors are respected because they are our elders and our predecessors who have trodden the path of life which we, the living, are now treading.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, African immigrants’ interests and investments can be seen in the volume of funds being remitted back to Africa. It should be recalled that the “remittances from Africans working abroad in the period 2000-2003 averaged about US \$17 billion per annum, virtually overtaking Foreign Direct Investment flows which

¹⁰⁵Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Jurong, Singapore: FEP, 1978), 36.

averaged about \$17 billion per annum, virtually overtaking foreign direct investment flows which averaged about \$15 billion per annum during the same period.”¹⁰⁶

Therefore, the immigrants have much at stake in their homeland and would ultimately return.

The missiological implication is a potential army of missionary personnel returning home with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The immigrants themselves who are Christians have shown much missionary zeal in both sharing the gospel and meeting some of the felt-needs in the African continent.

One body actively involved in missionary activities is the African Christian Fellowship USA (ACF USA), which is composed of African professionals in the United States. The organization has as its mission to “initiate and maintain active and relevant connections with the continent and peoples of Africa to maximize the benefits of Africa’s spiritual, social, economic, and cultural resources.”¹⁰⁷

One of its goals is to support mission work in Africa through

1. Developing aggressive, imaginative, and transparent programs to raise funds and resources both from within and outside the Fellowship to support missions.
2. Actively supporting the training and development of missionaries in Africa.
3. Sponsoring Christian missionaries and organizations to work among unreachable Africans both in the continent and in the Diaspora.
4. Creating and maintaining a database of trustworthy Christian Churches and Ministries in Africa and among Africans in the Diaspora for use in communication and support.
5. Providing Christian literature, tapes, videos, and films to stimulate growth and development of Christians and Churches in Africa.¹⁰⁸

Some of the ACF USA missionary activities in Africa in 2006 included evangelistic outreach to Uganda; the Central African Republic; and Kunuri, in Nigeria. They also provided computer literacy programs, scholarships, and medical services in these areas.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Resource Flows to Africa: An Update on Statistical Trends” [on-line]; accessed 26 August 2006; available from <http://www.un.org/africa/osaa>; Internet.

¹⁰⁷Reconnecting with Africa” [on-line]; accessed 28 February 2007; available from <http://www.acfusa.org/africa.php>; Internet.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

Therefore, if the immigrants who are non-Christians are reached, they would join the forces of African immigrant Christians in reaching out to their families for Christ. Bob Finley, in his book, *Reformation in Foreign Missions*, argues that missionary work, as it is being carried out in North America today, is counterproductive and hurts the cause of Christ.

The reasons, according to him, include: economic disparity between North America and other poor regions of the world; political suspicion, as missionaries are being viewed as agents of the CIA; cultural offenses because missionaries disrespect the cultural norms of their host culture, sending wrong messages as missionaries are perceived as agents of neo-colonialism; and misuse of resources because it costs about \$60,000 annually to send an American missionary family to live in a poor country, where most people live on less than a dollar a day. A final reason, according to Finley, is that the current missionary practice of sending out Americans fosters carnal, sectarian, and denominational rivalry and expansionism.¹¹⁰

Finley insists that more work should be concentrated in reaching immigrants who, in return, will reach out to their own people. While one may question his exegesis of the Scripture, his call for more attention to be focused on immigrants remains valid. This is especially true in the post-September 11 world. The immigrants would help share their faith in their home culture in a manner that would be culturally relevant and in offensive to the people. Those who are already Christians among the immigrants can be disciplined and equipped as missionaries to their respective countries and beyond. This is already happening in Europe, where immigrants have helped to revitalize the old churches and planted new ones, which are usually multicultural congregations. For instance, in the Republic of Ireland,

¹¹⁰Bob Finley, *Reformation in Foreign Missions* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2005), 11-13.

The wave of immigration, which began in the early 1990s, is changing the face of Ireland, culturally, socially, and, more importantly . . . its religious life. New members are coming into the Protestant congregations. The Orthodox presence is increasing. Many Black-Majority churches (BMCs) are being established and are developing at a fast rate all over the country.¹¹¹

While it is true that many of these congregations have a majority of their members drawn from Africa, the report also indicates that there are members of other races and Irish citizens. The report specifically mentioned, “It is known that Nigerians have established more churches and fellowships than any other nationalities combined in the last few years.”¹¹² The same church-planting experience is being repeated in England, where, for example, Matthew Ashimolowo--a Nigerian--started a congregation in 1992. It now has twelve thousand people in regular attendance each Sunday, with members drawn from forty-six different nations, and it is actively involved in world evangelization.¹¹³

In the area of Greater Cincinnati, while none of the evangelical churches is actively involved in reaching out to the West Africans, the Catholic Church is aggressively involved in reaching out to the West African immigrants. The Catholic Church in Greater Cincinnati, in conjunction with other Catholic dioceses all over the United States through agencies, has resettled nine hundred thousand refugees, provided legal assistance, secured work authorization for the immigrants, reunified the immigrants with family members, and helped them gain protection from persecution.¹¹⁴

Evangelical churches could learn from these examples because reaching the immigrants in general will help to reach out to the diverse population in both the United States and the world at large. Therefore, immigrants--from the missiological perspective,

¹¹¹“Black Immigrant Churches in the Republic of Ireland” [on-line]; accessed 1 March 2007; available from http://www.irishchurches.org/immigrant_Churches/Black_Immigrant_Churches_in_th/body; Internet.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³“Kingsway International Christian Centre Worship” [on-line]; accessed 1 March 2007; available from http://www.kicc.org.uk/our_church.asp; Internet.

¹¹⁴Donald Kerwin, “Migration Information Source,” Migration Policy Institute [on-line]; accessed 1 March 2007; available from <http://www.migrationinformation.org>; Internet.

could be considered as assets for the kingdom of God. They could open doors to reach out to people living in an otherwise difficult, and sometimes hostile, environment. It seems that God, through immigration, has placed the laborers for world evangelization in the harvest; and the harvest field in this context is the field of unreached immigrant believers and the undisciplined immigrant Christians.

Conclusion

There are other possible missiological implications that could be drawn from the West African worldviews but, so far, the implications noted are those necessary for evangelistic outreach, and for presenting the claim of Christ to the immigrants and others with identical worldviews. It is clear from the implications that ministering to the West African immigrants will be challenging, especially in terms of relationship, because it will be time-consuming. However, the joy and possibility of viewing the new converts as potential partners in global mission make the effort a worthwhile missiological venture.