

Youth Conversion from Mainstream to Pentecostal churches: a case of selected churches in Matero and Emmasdale Townships in Lusaka District

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate the reasons that led to youth conversion from mainstream to Pentecostal churches in Emmasdale and in the neighbourhood of Matero. The study was guided by Horton's intellectualist theory of conversion in Africa. It used a case study design. The method of data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaire. Findings of the study were that, there was automatic conversion taking place among the youths in mainstream churches to Pentecostalism. This was evident in all respondents in mega Pentecostal Church who had a mainstream background. Church leaders in mainstream churches were aware of youth converting to Pentecostal churches by accepting back the youths who had converted to a Pentecostal Church but had later made up their minds to go back. The study further revealed that non-Pentecostal parents supported and encouraged their children who converted to a mega Pentecostal Church owing to incentives such as; scholarships, employment and supportive programmes provided to their children. The study recommends that: sermon presentation should be revised in some mainstream churches. Explaining scriptures should not be exegetical only but linking scriptures to real life struggles of the youth. The church leaders in mainstream churches must formulate programmes that are more practical and youth oriented like charismatic prayer service, provision of scholarship, employment and positions of responsibilities through different ministries within the mainstream churches. Non-Pentecostal parents should not be too sceptical about children who associate themselves with Pentecostalism but encourage them to genuinely convert to this brand of Christianity.

Key words: Conversion, Pentecostalism, Charismatic churches, Mainstream churches

INTRODUCTION

The article focused on current issues in Christian conversion of the 1960s (Hollenweger, 1997). In this context, the core embroils youths. The shift in Christian charismatic beliefs that happened in the 1960 and the modern Pentecostalism of 1980s and 90s impacted the lives of the young people world over and Zambia at large (Gray, 1978). Since the arrival of Pentecostal churches in Emmasdale and its neighbourhood of Matero Township in Lusaka district of Zambia, youth conversion has never been given attention in terms of what causes youths to convert from their mother churches, the mainstream to Pentecostal churches. There is need to know what attracts youths to Pentecostalism through empirical research in order to lessen dependence on theoretical constructs outside the Zambian context. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons that led to youth conversion to Pentecostalism. To hunt empirical evidence, the author explored the question at hand systematically by tackling the following study objectives; 1) to explore reasons for youth conversion to Pentecostalism? 2) to examine the reactions of mainstream church leaders who may be losing youths to Pentecostalism. And 3) to ascertain the reaction of non- Pentecostal parents whose children are converting to Pentecostalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christianity was introduced in Zambia by different missionaries from Europe in the last half of the nineteenth century due to Livingstone's missionary work in central Africa. The setting up of Livingstonia mission in Malawi prompted different missionaries to reach Zambia and spread the good news.

Gadsden (1992) observes that, by the beginning of the 19th century the influx of Christians from many denominations had already spread in Northern Rhodesia. In the 1960s the Renewal Movement of the Neo-Pentecostalism emerged in America and spread to other continents through American evangelists who first penetrated through learning institutions such as universities, colleges and high schools (Ojo, 1988). Hunt (2012) describes the feature that distinguished the modern movement as its appeal to the youths. The /missionaries invaded the learning institutions because youths were open to modernity. In Africa neo-Pentecostalism increased in the decades between 1980s and 1990s in West Africa (Robeck and Cecil, 2006)

The movement was first experienced in Nigeria among students in universities and spread to other sub-Saharan regions. The activities of charismatic movement through student unions enabled the movement to reach Zambia through international interaction between students in Universities, Colleges and High Schools (Ojo, 1988 and Cheyeka, 2006). The introduction of Scripture Union in Secondary schools and Zambia Fellowship of Evangelical Students (ZAFES) in colleges brought a new Charismatic way of praise and worship. This changed the young people who proclaimed having been baptised in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Further, Cheyeka (2006) observed that, Charismatic movement in Zambia was reinforced by the visit of Televangelist Bill Graham in 1960 and attracted as many young people as possible from different denominations. From that time Zambian Charismatic adopted practices which would characterise the movement in the 1990s (Cheyeka, 2009; Lumbe, 2008).

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study was purely qualitative in nature and used a case study design because it targeted the only mega Pentecostal church in Emmasdale Township and selected two mainstream churches, one within Emmasdale and another in its neighbourhood of Matero in order to get in-depth information. The population of the study comprised youths, church leaders and non-Pentecostal parents. The study used purposive (typical) sampling. Purposive (typical) sampling method was appropriate for this study because it only targeted those respondents who were expected to have adequate knowledge and information about youth converting to Pentecostalism. Therefore, the sample consisted of 36 participants out of which 24 were youths from three selected churches (8 from each church); 6 church leaders two from each church and 6 non-Pentecostal parents who were snowballed through youths from Pentecostal churches. Moreover, the instruments used for data collection in this study were: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and questionnaires. Data from the instruments used was analysed from the emerging themes of the study objectives. Multiple methods of data collection validated the research. This was so because methods complement each other with no overlapping weaknesses (Patton, 1990). Combination of methods ensured that inconsistencies were removed. To guarantee the validity and reliability of the results, the researcher ensured that the instruments of data collection were piloted and reviewed by research experts.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Reasons youths have for converting to Pentecostalism

Using focus group discussions, questions were asked to respondents in all the three selected churches, to find out if youths were satisfied with the messages that were preached in their churches. Findings revealed that, some youths in mainstream churches were not satisfied with the sermons preached in those churches. As one respondent from Roman Catholic Church said, “some clergy preach the messages by reading direct from the bible with little applications of real life situations.” This finding was also revealed in United Church of Zambia that, some clergymen preached messages that were quoted direct from the bible, as one male respondent narrated that, “sometimes you find someone is just quoting scriptures throughout his sermon, without giving proper explanations. I do not get touched to such messages.” Results also indicated that some youths from Roman Catholic Church left the church and joined Pentecostal churches following the word of prophecy and prosperity messages, preached by Pentecostal preachers. One respondent said that:

Two of my friends left our church and joined Pentecostal churches saying that, in Catholic Church messages were boring because they do not address issues of being successful and prosperity. They said that, were more comfortable in Pentecostal churches because they do receive the prophetic word of being rich and prosperous in future.

Further, results on prayer, findings revealed that, some youths in mainstream churches had intentions to join Pentecostalism because they no longer wanted prayers offered by one man on their behalf due to different social problems youths undergo. Generally, the respondents indicated that, they wanted to participate in individual spontaneous prayers and worship, to lift up their hands, shouting, jumping and dance. One respondent from United Church of Zambia explained that, “I personally love prayer and I do admire how Pentecostals pray whereby one person gives prayer points and the congregation raise their voices and pray individually. As youths we have different problems that need us to pray on our own, lifting up our voices and express ourselves to God.”

Similarly on praise and worship songs, all respondents appreciated the worship music in local languages. One of them said, “praise and worship songs prepare our hearts to receive the gospel.” In addition another respondent said that, “music is a powerful tool that moves an individual to the spiritual realms.”

The findings on media indicated that some youths were attracted to Pentecostal preachers through local and international mass media that exposed them to different religious programmes. The follow up questions that were given to respondents who had already converted to Bread of Life Church, a male respondent said that, “I joined Bread of Life after watching the ‘The Hour of Blessing’ by Bishop Imakando in 2001 and in 2009 I became a full member.” Some respondents from Roman Catholic Church explained that, the use of new technology such as television, radio and internet caused some of them to join Pentecostal churches while respondents from United Church of Zambia said that, because of this new technology in media, some opt to stay home and watch different religious channels on television. One respondent indicated that, “nowadays I do not go to church to listen from boring sermons; I just stay home and choose a religious channel I could enjoy.” Youths in both mainstream and Pentecostal churches indicated that, were more interested in Pentecostal preachers than those in mainstream churches.

Reactions of the church leaders who may be losing youths to Pentecostalism

Findings in mainstream churches revealed that leaders were aware of young people converting to Pentecostalism. When the follow up questions were posed in both churches the respondents indicated that, sermons that were preached in mainstream churches were somehow boring to young people because they cover all social groups found in church. The Priest from Roman Catholic Church commented that, “in the Catholic Church we are a universal church, we do not do things opposite or different from what other Catholics do in terms of preaching the word. If am preaching from John 7: 2 even in Rome it is the same.” Reverend from United Church of Zambia also gave her explanation that:

In this generation, it is true nowadays children do not want to suffer. So, you find youths go to Pentecostal churches where they preach sermons of prosperity in life. So we see them leaving our church bit by bit at different levels. They go to their church of choice and worship in those Pentecostal churches.

When the researcher probed further to find out how the respondent reacts towards those youths who leave the United Church of Zambia, the respondent said that: “They do worship in those Pentecostal churches quite okay but they know their roots as I have already explained that, they worship and worship*Nzeru zika bwela* [when they made up their mind] they realise and come back to their original churches.” The same question was posed to the Priest and his reaction was that, youths should not be withheld because they are just looking for happiness in life therefore it is good to let go of them and experience this happiness. Youths who find happiness in those churches, they do stay there but those who fail to find happiness we see them come back.” The Priest further commented that, “those whose needs or requirements are not met are the ones who come back. When they make up their mind and come back, we do receive them. But for those who find what they wanted in life, we lose them because we do not provide what they expected to find in our church.” He further concluded that, “such youths are more likely to behave like the prodigal son.”

Reaction of non- Pentecostal parents whose children convert to Pentecostalism

Results to the above research question revealed that, at first, the non-Pentecostal parents opposed the decision their children had made to join a Pentecostal church. One of the respondents said that, he was not happy with his daughter who left a family church [Presbyterian Church] and joined Bread of Life church. Another respondent said that, “at first I opposed my daughter from joining Bread of Life Church I thought it was a Satanist church because I was not comfortable with their charismatic way of worship [*ku kuwa ngati chinji, ku panga chongo*]. This was because Charismatic worship was not yet introduced in my church [Reformed Church of Zambia].” Furthermore, the parent from Seventh Day Advents commented that, “it was my son’s choice to join Bread of Life Church but I faced opposition from my fellow church members being a church elder there.”

The researcher wanted to know what made the parents to accept the decision their children had made. The general response was that, the Pentecostal churches met the social needs of their children which were not attended to in their original churches. However, the social needs that were pointed out to cause the conversion of those youths were said to be; employment, scholarships, need of promotion at work, how to grow their business and other supportive programs that were initiated by different ministries within the church.

One parent said that, “even though I had condemned that church like what others have done, I later regretted because through youth ministry, my daughter has been given a scholarship to do nursing at Katete general hospital.” The parent whose son converted from Seventh Day Adventist commented that, “am happy that later my son was given scholarship to University of Lusaka. It was a good decision that he made.” Whereas another parent indicated that, “even though we have lost Florence from our family church, I am happy that finally, she was given employment at Bread of Life church.”

The researcher further, wanted to find out if at all the non-Pentecostal parents supported their children because of the incentives that the Pentecostal churches provided. The findings revealed that, parents were happy and supported their children to remain in Pentecostal church because those churches seemed to be more responsive to their children’s needs than what the mainstream churches offered to them. Therefore, the parents encouraged their children to continue attending church services at Bread of Life Church.

PRESENTATION OF DISCUSSIONS

The key findings of the study are discussed under three headings representing the research questions that the study aimed to answer.

Reasons for youth conversion

The study established that youths seem to automatically convert from mainstream to Pentecostal churches due to a number of reasons. Youths were disappointed with routine way of sermon presentation in some mainstream churches; clergymen preached the messages by reading direct from the bible with less application to young people’s expectations in life. Exegetical explanations of scriptures in messages were not quite appealing to young people. It is for this reason that one respondent said some of his friends left mainstream churches and joined Pentecostal churches because they wanted prophetic ministries that enable the youths to build their hope for future expectations in life. Pentecostalism promotes radical conversion of young people due to relevant messages through the work of the Holy Spirit that the mainstream churches have been challenged to provide (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

Similarly on prosperity gospel and its modern preachers was another pinpointing cause for youth conversion from mainstream to Pentecostal churches revealed by the majority of the respondents. This finding indicated that Pentecostal Pastors in Emmasdale and in the vicinity of Matero preach the prosperity gospel messages that attract young people for material blessings and well-being (Robeck and Cecil, 2006). Youths move from their mother churches to join Pentecostal churches following prosperity messages that respond to the existential needs of people within the contemporary situation of social struggles. The messages articulate issues of being successful, victorious, promotion, elevation, power, breakthrough and winning. On the contrary, this does not happen in some mainstream churches where the prosperity gospel does not take centre stage (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Ojo, 1988).

Youths felt hopeless because their energies were not utilised in mainline churches as a result they move towards Pentecostalism that seem to emphasize on personal, heart-felt experiences of God through the spirit to all people without preconditions, enabling them to be powerful and assertive in societies where they have been marginalised. Pentecostal churches just like African Independent churches, offer solutions to people-felt needs in all their varieties (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; Anderson, 2005).

Some mainstream churches do not emphasise on spontaneous prayers. Youths who took part in the study indicated that they did not want someone to offer prayers on their behalf. One of them said that they were human beings and had personal issues such as unemployment, lack of promotion at the place of work, lack of scholarship, sickness, poverty and many other situations. Youth wanted prayers that engaged them individually and worship by lifting up their voices, stretch-out their hands, shouting, jumping, clapping and other gusto they could master (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Robeck, 2006).

The study revealed that young people in Matero and Emmasdale appreciated the value of gospel music. Majority of the respondents viewed music as a powerful tool that moves an individual to the spiritual realms. Some respondents in mainstream churches indicated that, music touches the inner most feeling more than listening from sermons. Some youths in United Church of Zambia were touched by a Pentecostal pastor who gave praise and worship choruses before he could preach to prepare young people's hearts to receive the gospel. Evidently, both locally and internationally composed songs played in Pentecostal churches attract young people to join Pentecostalism. As Asamoah-Gyadu (2013) affirmed in his study that, Pentecostal music gospel played in local and international tunes cause youths to be attracted to this kind of music because it draws them with appropriate gestures such as hand raising, prostration, kneeling, weeping and other symbolic and emotional expression that lead people literally abandon themselves in worship before God (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Chitando, 2002).

Reactions of church leaders

The study revealed that, church leaders were aware of the movement of some youths from mainstream to Pentecostal churches. The church leaders exercise tolerance and patience, they tend to teach and stick to doctrines of their churches because they understood the age group they were dealing with. They do not bother to follow up those youths who leave their churches to join Pentecostal churches instead they wait for those who might make up their minds to come back. Both respondents said there was no need for them to preach against Pentecostal churches that seemed to accommodate those young people since in Christianity the central teaching is the belief in one God.

Another finding revealed that, the church leaders indicated that youths needed happiness to achieve their goals in life. Reverend from United Church of Zambia said at this stage the youths have many expectations, they want to hear what the future has for them; they want somebody who can tell them prophetic words about their future. Young people join Pentecostal churches that seem to have a cultural flexibility in its experiential and participatory liturgy, offering a place-to-feel-at-home (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

Lastly, on reaction of the church leader who might be losing youth to Pentecostalism, the study revealed that the church leaders showed love and forgiveness to those youths who had left the mainstream churches and later make up their minds to go back. The Parable of the Prodigal Son helps the leaders to understand and accept some situations that attract youths to convert to Pentecostal churches. However, Even though youths seem to convert to Pentecostal churches, they are not convinced with what is taught in those Pentecostal churches they had joined as a result they perceived God as the same either in mainstream or Pentecostal church.

Reactions of non-Pentecostal parents

The study on reactions of non-Pentecostal parents revealed that non-Pentecostal parents at first had challenges in accepting their children/dependants who seem to have converted to Pentecostal churches in Matero and Emmasdale Townships. Some parents were sceptical while others showed reservations towards that conversion. In some mainstream churches, Charismatic worship is not emphasised. It is for this reason that one parent said she questioned her daughter the mannerism of praying in louder voices which was not experienced in her church (RCZ). Some parents were not yet acquainted with this kind of prayers, others wanted their children to remain in their family church as a result they were disappointed

with the decisions that their children had made. However, later some parents accepted and supported their children who joined Pentecostal churches due to some incentives that their children were provided with such as scholarship, employment and other necessities. Similarly, at Chikuni the progressive older generation came to perceive the advantage of schooling for their children, they recommended it and its trappings to them [baptism], for their own part, since they were beyond taking advantage of schooling. They felt that neither schooling nor Catholicism was good for them (Carmody, 1998).

Further, the study showed that, non-Pentecostal parents were aware of the social needs of their children in Matero and Emmasdale Townships. Therefore, the acceptance of their children who seem to convert to Pentecostalism came upon seeing the benefits that their children acquired from the Pentecostal churches they had joined. The respondents themselves were not attracted to Pentecostal churches, but the incentives offered to their children caused them to support and give freedom of worship to their children/dependants. At Chikuni, young people converted to Catholicism because of education and access to wage employment offered by the mission (Carmody, 2001). However, conversion those youths in Matero and Emmasdale might claim to have, taken place, may not be true conversion, youths may have just been attracted to Pentecostal churches because of the incentives that were provided in those churches and not necessary under-going deep conversion.

Finally, the study on reaction of non-Pentecostal parent revealed that, some parents were attracted to spiritual well-being of their children who converted to Pentecostal churches. The majority indicated that, children were able to pray and read the bible more than ever before but none of the respondents [non-Pentecostal parents] had joined Pentecostalism. Non-Pentecostal parents were more interested in the benefits that their children/dependants found in Pentecostal churches and not necessarily the faith of their children. Conversion at Chikuni showed that Tongas and other Zambians who went through Chikuni schooling became Catholic largely because of the material incentives which the mission offered (Carmody, 2001).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After a careful analysis of the findings in the light of the study purpose the researcher was of the view that, sermons in mainstream churches were not youth oriented. The messages in sermons were more exegetical in explanation of scriptures with less interpretation on real life struggles of the youths. Youths in mainstream churches admired the prosperity gospel that was preached by Pentecostal preachers in Pentecostal churches that gave them hope in their social struggles and to remain expectant. The study further showed that, youths in Emmasdale and its vicinity of Matero wanted charismatic prayers; to approach God in their own way and express themselves by lifting up hands, shouting, jumping and dancing. The petition and confessional prayers were not enough to overcome their social needs.

The findings on reactions of church leaders in mainstream churches, whose youths may be converting to Pentecostalism, indicated that, the church leaders were aware of the youths converting to Pentecostal churches in Emmasdale and its vicinity of Matero. The leaders accepted the youths who had converted but had later made up their minds to come back. Further, church leaders did not ex-communicate youths who had converted, but gave them chance to explore and find happiness in life.

Finally, the findings on reactions of non-Pentecostal parents whose children converted to Bread of Life Church were that, the parents gave support to their children/dependants by encouraging them to continue attending services at a Pentecostal Church. Acceptance came upon seeing benefits in form of incentives such as education, employment and other supportive programs provided by different church ministries.

In the light of the main findings, the following were some of the recommendations proposed to mainstream churches to ensure effective youth oriented programmes.

The study recommends that, sermon presentation should be revised in mainstream churches. Explanation of scriptures should not be exegetical only but link scriptures to real life struggles of the youth.

The church leaders in some mainstream churches must formulate programmes that are more practical and youth oriented such as charismatic prayers that allow individuals to offer prayers on their own during mass or after mass services. In addition, incentives such as scholarship, employment and other necessities

should be provided especially to the youths who are in need. For instance, the church can come up with different projects that will generate resources to support the needy.

The study further suggests that, non-Pentecostal parents should not be sceptical to children who associate themselves with Pentecostal churches. Instead they should give their children freedom of worship.

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